CIRCULATIONS:
NAVIGATING THE DIGITAL IN NORTHERN ONTARIO MEDIA ARTS

CIRCULATIONS: NAVIGATING THE DIGITAL IN NORTHERN ONTARIO MEDIA ARTS

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Jonathan Tyrrell, *Sounding Bodies: Eutopia* (2021). Steel roofing panels, sound transducers, aluminum stands, and steel pipe. 10 x 1 x 7 in. Curator: Darren Copeland, New Adventures in Sound Art (NAISA) (South River, Ontario).

CIRCULATIONS:
NAVIGATING THE DIGITAL IN NORTHERN ONTARIO MEDIA ARTS

Project Background

For a number of years, the Media Arts Network of Ontario (MANO) has been talking with artists and organizations in Northern Ontario regarding digital engagement and challenges within the media arts sector. The Cold Water Conference in 2018, produced in collaboration with the Near North Mobile Media Lab (n2m2l), brought together artists from across the region. The conference added to previous and ongoing conversations and introduced additional topics of importance.

Prior to this research project, our knowledge of digital engagement and challenges in the region was anecdotal. From consultations and visits in the region, we heard from artists, curators, collectives, organizations, and community members about some of the challenges in the media arts. These included a lack of access to professional skills developments and production resources, digital preservation, and market/distribution. MANO was encouraged to apply for a Digital Strategies grant through the Canada Council for the Arts because each of these challenges presents opportunities for implementing infrastructure and other solutions to better address the varying needs of communities.

The Community Control and Digital Infrastructure research project focused on identifying where artists and organizations have found successes mobilizing digital technology, clarifying current mobilization issues, and evaluating whether collective strategies could address some of them. This project aimed to capture integral parts of past and ongoing conversations in order to provide some pathways for artists, collectives, galleries, and organizations in the media arts sector. The outcomes of this study provide a background for how communities of practice can

be supported. Our research proceeded with the understanding that communities themselves must identify, organize, and run their projects.

In many conversations across the region, it was noted that it is difficult to have work seen and supported by curators and programmers in southern urban centres such as Toronto and Montreal. In the past, a small group of select artists were chosen to travel from the North for meetings with arts professionals in Toronto in order to increase their visibility and the market for their work. Typically, these artists already had some visibility, but meeting with the art professionals in Toronto did little to impact their marketability as artists. But the practice of creating exposure or visibility for a few artists heightened divisions within local communities in terms of perceptions of access. As a response, reconsidering access as not southern-based but northern-focussed, and discussions of how digital presence(s) or platform(s) can be developed to bypass gatekeepers in the South and build regional or hyperlocal artistic identities on the international stage, have gained momentum. Achieving these goals will require elaboration, visioning, and strategic planning.

Artists, organizations, collectives, and municipal and regional decision makers will benefit from this work. The research provides a responsive call to develop digital infrastructure in the region. It offers a framework that supports media arts, addresses local needs, and benefits communities. For many communities, arts and culture and the existence of institutions of support directly support youth and artist retention, community development, local identity, and Indigenous survivance.[1]

Our approach was to root the research in community benefit and cooperative values in order to provide a background for the responsible development of non-exploitative digital tools and platforms. In many instances, digital projects in the arts begin with considerations about how to extract value—economic and/or cultural—from the sector.

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1   See https://decolonialdictionary.wordpress.com/2021/04/15/survivance/.

Our work is based in how digital solutions can add value to the sector and keep value within communities, thereby preventing new forms of resource mining by intermediaries.

The question of benefit is becoming increasingly contested as traditional systems of film and video distribution, private galleries, and market events are presented with digital challengers and decentralized networks. Simultaneous to this movement of decentralization, self-identified curators and/or corporate platforms increasingly mediate the value chain within art. This set of tensions informed the project as we listened for alternative possibilities that might reaffirm any utopian impulses of artist-run culture within the new economy.

These questions are of particular interest in Northern Ontario where extractive resource economies have driven the region's growth. There is an opportunity for the arts to provide leadership for community-led development in broader sectors across the region.

Regional Context

Northern Ontario spans an area roughly 806,707 km². Communities range from mid-sized cities to small towns and First Nations communities, along with significant areas with small communities that are accessible by air or ice road. In Northwestern Ontario alone, there are 88 First Nations linked together by one of nine Tribal Councils. The scale of the geography can be hard to comprehend—it takes more time to drive from Toronto to Thunder Bay than it does from Toronto to Halifax and longer still to drive west to Kenora or any of the communities north of Thunder Bay. It is understood that there is no single representative community or experience, or single culture, between Toronto and Halifax, yet there is a tendency to flatten the cultural, social, and economic complexities of the region to a simple equation of geography. Even a recognition of the significant Indigenous and Francophone populations in the region belies the significant

differences, community to community, in experiences, distinct language groups (Anishinaabeg northern dialect, Anishinaabeg southern dialect, Cree, Oji-Cree), access, and organizational development.
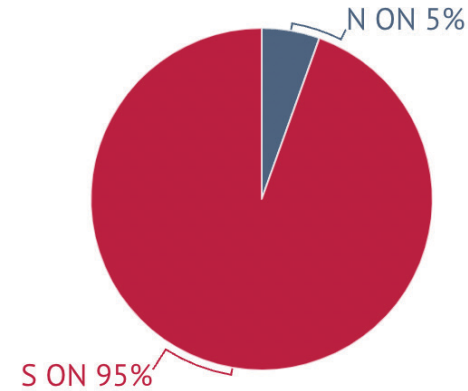
Region	Total Population
N ON	780,140
S ON	13,448,494

1.1 Population of Northern and Southern Ontario [StatsCanada][2]
1.1a Population of Northern and Southern Ontario [StatsCanada]
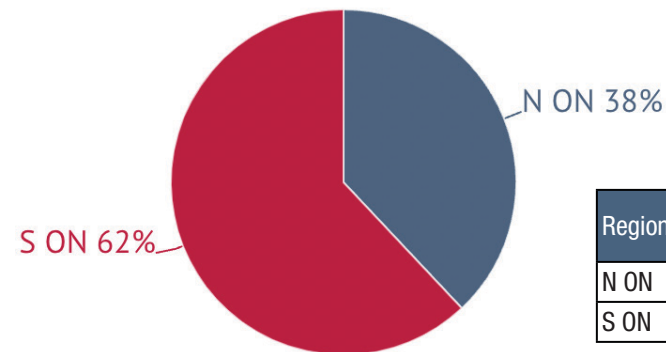
Region	Indigenous Population
N ON	142,235
S ON	232,160

1.2 Indigenous Population of Northern Ontario and Southern Ontario
1.2a Indigenous Population of Northern Ontario and Southern Ontario

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2   The population statistics were sourced from StatsCanada: they should be understood as indicative, not absolute, numbers.

Within the region, there are dozens of unique communities of artistic practice across all disciplines. Similar to many northern communities across Canada, artists in Northern Ontario face distinct challenges in accessing resources and markets with equity in the geographic south, and in developing digital spaces.

The southeastern portion of the region (Sudbury-North Bay) has developed as a commercial hub for film and television production and there are clear economic and cultural impacts. However, the region's artistic communities, when evaluating their connectivity and relationships with a more global network, are outside of this boom. Similarly, much of the region is both geographically and digitally isolated from artistic communities of practice that are active in the more developed arts ecosystems within the larger communities in the region.

According to Hills Strategies Report,[3] the number of artists per community in the region is relatively consistent with the rest of Canada: the national average is 0.9 percent, with Manitoulin Island at 1.1 percent, North Bay at 0.8 percent, and both Thunder Bay and Sudbury at 0.7 percent.[4,5] While there is relative equity in grants distributed to the region in comparison to the South, there is inequity in funding and sector capacity when analyzing more fully differing contexts between north and south. This requires funders and policy makers to include considerations of Northern Ontario's significant regional differences: reduced access to other sources of funding, textured differences in regard to accessing layered resources and other supports, and additional barriers and expenses related to geography, employment, population

demographics, and infrastructures. Any discussion about funding equity and sector capacity needs to include these, and other, elements.

Region	Recipients
S ON	5,461
N ON	427
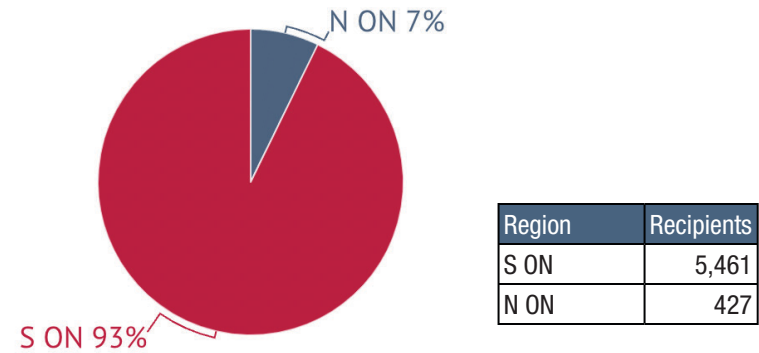
1.3 Total Number of Individual Grant Recipients for OAC and CCA (Fiscal Years 2017-18 to 2019-2020).

1.3a Table of Total Number of Individual Grant Recipients for OAC and CCA (Fiscal Years 2017-18 to 2019-2020).

In addition, data from the Ontario Arts Council demonstrates that while roughly 62 percent of Indigenous artists are in Southern Ontario, they receive 66 percent of the total funding allocation to Indigenous artists in Ontario and receive higher grant amounts; these numbers demonstrate inequity in distribution of funding to Indigenous artists in the province.

1.4 Bar Chart of OAC Grants Received by Indigenous Artists Southern and Northern Ontario (Fiscal Years 2017-18 to 2019-2020)

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3 This research is dated, but little data specific to the region is available.
4 It is worth noting that artists in the region earn significantly less money than others in the regional labour force; for instance, artists in Great Sudbury earned an average of $20,100, a 36% wage gap, and artist income in Sault Ste. Marie averaged $10,300, a 64% wage gap. While Sudbury and District is more populous, it also has more organizations of support and a more robust arts ecosystem, which may account for some of the disparity between artist incomes.
5 Artist numbers for more rural and First Nation communities are not available.
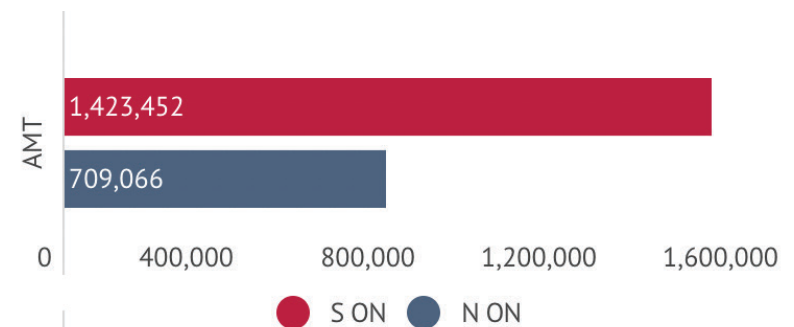
Region	Amt	#Grants	Avg Amt
S ON	1,423,452	198	7,189
N ON	709,066	175	4,052

1.4a Table of OAC Grants to Indigenous Artists Northern and Southern Ontario (Fiscal Years 2017-18 to 2019-2020)

For many artists working in the region, digital communication through social media, websites, and other platforms provides a vital connection to artistic peers and markets, while allowing artists to remain in their home communities. While the digital transformation has helped many artists build networks and profiles, infrastructure and access are not consistent across the region. Some communities along the coast, in the north of the province, as well as communities in the south of the region, have very limited individual broadband access or only community-based (such as local library) broadband and satellite internet access. Negotiating expense and access, as well as infrastructure gaps, makes networking, equipment access and resources, and using online marketing platforms difficult for artists. In addition, the breadth of the internet makes profile development and being 'findable' challenging if the artist lacks the benefit of sophisticated, and curated, approaches.

Production resources may seem outside the scope of a digital case study, but opportunities for a cooperatively run digital platform for shared equipment across the region could emerge as an option to address the challenge in scaling physical infrastructure across a sparsely populated area. Tied to any conversation of equipment and digital platforms is building access and opportunities for training and education.

Project research questions

The research, and its conversation circles, were guided by the following broad questions, with nuanced questions designed for each circle and conversation:

1. **Control**: How do communities control media infrastructure (physical, digital, networked, and other infrastructure) and what does that mean?
2. **Control and access**: What does it mean when existing digital platforms are defined and exist outside of the region or when community need is defined and controlled outside of the region? How might northern artists and communities define and control platforms and/or their use of them?
3. **Dissemination**: Where and how are artists finding other artists and their work and how are they sharing their own projects? How do digital platforms influence the kinds of work and audiences that are created?
4. **Broadcasting**: What does broadcasting mean in a contemporary sense; what is community television in the context of online dissemination?
5. **Creation**: What does it mean to have local content and creation in local communities and how do local interpretations intersect with the national/global online directions?
6. **Strategies**: At what level do the changes need to happen? (e.g., how to navigate the system, micro-grants, and differing funding roles and mandates across organizations like FedNor, arts councils, and municipal entities)

Process

In our design of the project and engagement with facilitators and participants, it was important for us to be open to the complexity of the region and its relationships between Indigenous and settler, urban and rural, urban and remote artists, and organizations and communities as expressed and reflected by a wide range of views and outcomes.

The original DSF grant envisioned a series of in-person conversations around Northern Ontario. Due to the pandemic, we restructured the project in response to changing circumstances, including:

- **Restrictions** on travel and gatherings.
- **Local capacity**: Due to the pandemic, a number of contacts and cultural workers had been laid-off and were unavailable while others were experiencing the effects of emotional, cultural, and economic impacts. Many had to completely reconfigure their projects and organizational strategies, resulting in personal over-extension. These issues varied from organization to organization, community to community, and person to person. The region experienced, overall, limited local energy and social and economic capacity; already marginalized and/or underfunded groups were stretched even more profoundly.
- **Consultation Fatigue/Resistance**: Pandemic responsiveness and consultations regarding strategic responses has increased consultation fatigue, exacerbating already present and ongoing consultation fatigue. Northerners are routinely surveyed/surveilled and the pandemic added additional stressors to the fatigue environment.
- **Technology and the online factor**: Working online has increased exponentially since the onset of COVID, but not all locations have reliable internet. Many people are experiencing Zoom fatigue.
- **MANO and contractor capacity**: As with the rest of the sector, MANO staff, supporting board members, and contractors were working to respond to the pandemic, support the sector, and/or adapt to the intensities and fluctuations caused by the pandemic.

Rather than developing a highly structured interview process, we instead adopted general principles for our response/outreach and project design:

1. **Adaptability/Adjusting to context/Accessibility**: The context required a great deal of fluidity and adaptability to the shifting needs, timelines, and availability and capacity of each organization, community, and person we worked with. In such a large region with such uneven contexts, capacity (emotional, economic, technological, etc.), and viability, it was difficult to devise a single strategy that would be relevant to each community and artist under "normal" circumstances. With the current circumstances, it was advised that we create very localized strategies that would be meaningful and accessible to each community, hub, and/or network.
2. **Relationship-building and collaboration**: Building relationships through conversation was integral to the project ethos from the beginning. However, it was clear from a preliminary round of conversations with contacts in the region that we would not be able to facilitate centralized conversations and surveys until we'd had more 1:1 conversations with individuals and small networks. Collaboration with leadership in communities and the sector would greatly facilitate the process and relationship building as well as contribute to establishing a network.
3. **Building/contributing to communities/decentralizing the process/ownership of research**: It was clear we needed to ensure that not only did the research belong to the participants and the communities, but that we were contributing, building, and responding.
4. **Clarity of purpose, process, language**: We realized that how we communicate about the project and the process needed to be extremely clear and accessible.

As a result of the pandemic, the textured elements of the region, and our general principles, we designed a decentralized, community-driven process. Drawing upon old-school "phone trees" and early union organizing approaches, we decided to hire a team of facilitators around the region, rather than relying solely on MANO staff to conduct interviews. We invited submissions of interest for experienced and new facilitators, developed a simple application process, and invited facilitators to design their own conversation circle and invite interested participants—artists and cultural workers from within their artistic, disciplinary, cultural, First Nation, and/or geographic communities and networks.

This approach offered flexibility, the capacity to pivot quickly, and a decentralized, and community-controlled, process that was highly responsive to local needs, contexts, and capacity. While we had a series of overarching research questions and goals for the project, this model allowed greater community ownership over the process and conversations. The process privileged existing relationships and connections and allowed conversations to go into as much depth (and time) as each conversation and conversant needed or wanted. This ran counter to a typical consultation model in which all participants respond to the same questions (posed by outside researchers), have a limited time to respond, and are presented with facilitators/interviewers with whom the participant may feel discomfort. Multiple conversations allowed circles to revisit and deepen their conversations, allowing for a much more nuanced response than is typically available in round tables, consultations, and focus groups.

Feedback from the facilitators and participants was encouraging. Many noted how meaningful it was for them to connect with artists, existing colleagues, and make new connections, as well as how valuable MANO was in terms of administrative and facilitator support. In some cases, MANO was invited to co-facilitate, take notes, transcribe, or assist with creating the conversant invoices, depending on fluctuations in their time and capacity over the months of the project. As we heard throughout the project, mentorship, collaborations, and knowledge sharing happens through informal networks, yet much of this work is unpaid and often unsupported. Through these circles, participants had the space and resources (each person was paid $35/hour) to engage in the kinds of conversations they needed and wanted to have.

Project Activities

Partnership
Through their work on a number of advisory committees for new media and advocacy projects MANO Director Ben Donoghue and Indigenous Culture and Media Innovations (ICMI) Director Monique Manatch had the opportunity to discuss the difficulties of adapting to online research projects in response to the then new COVID pandemic. Both organizations were developing research projects relating to community control and the digital; ICMI focusing on digital preservation and dissemination in Indigenous communities across Canada and MANO on the media arts in Northern Ontario.

The decentralized structure of MANO's approach aligned with ICMI's way of working, so the organizations decided to combine efforts where they overlapped to better address both areas of research. This collaboration allowed an expansion of the number of facilitators and more support for their planning. ICMI participated in facilitator recruitment, consultation design with the facilitators, facilitator training workshops, discussion circles, and interviews, stepping out of the process after the first third of the research phase in order to continue their research in other regions of Canada while MANO continued the work in Ontario. Some of the material in this report may appear in other forms within ICMI's research. We are grateful to Monique and ICMI for their contributions to the project and look forward to seeing what they learned from these conversations.

Facilitator Recruitment

Recruitment, developing capacity and relationship building was integral to the project's ethos and objectives in building a network of facilitators throughout the region. Originally intended as a series of conversations facilitated by MANO staff, we restructured the project in response to limitations driven by the pandemic. We met with leaders, artists, and organizers to think through this restructured process.

MANO proposed employing facilitators from communities throughout the region. We contacted known leaders and organizers directly and promoted the call through our contacts, networks, and an extended social media campaign. The hiring process was designed to be simple and straightforward (a short bio or statement and a brief outline of the kinds of conversations they would like to facilitate and with whom). The proposals could be written or oral (by audio, video, or phone call). We also emphasized that we would support and train new facilitators. This accessibility was important to ensure that there were no barriers for potential applicants. A great deal of strong work in the region is done by informal networks, unpaid labour, and folks who are not formally trained as community organizers or facilitators. It is possible that they might not recognize either their capacity or the value of their leadership.

The facilitator team was critical to the success of the project, but the development of the circle of facilitators, beyond the formal scope of the project, was equally important. The project presented an opportunity for each facilitator to deepen their own work in community and to support local and long-term conversations about infrastructure, community control, access, capacity building, and other structural questions (that typically are unsupported within project funding parameters). The process also allowed the facilitator to build networks and relationships with other facilitators across the region.

Circle conversation design:

Each facilitator was invited to:

- Design their own conversation circles through an invitation for artists and cultural workers from within their artistic, disciplinary, cultural, First Nation, and/or geographic communities and networks to participate.
- Determine the format for their conversations and community driven research, including whether meetings were online or (safely) in person, were one-to-one conversations, or a gathering of multiple participants, whether surveys, piloting, and/or evaluating an activity, program, or strategy were included.
- Determine the numbers of conversation circles to enable facilitation based on capacity (and we designed the budget to allow for flexibility so that facilitators could extend their conversations, add additional participants, and host detailed conversations in response to emergent themes).
- Determine the process and content of their conversations: While MANO shared its own research questions with the facilitators, facilitator could adapt the questions (for language, accessibility, tone, etc.), use only those questions that made sense for their context and circles, and develop their own questions (based on context and community). The Project Coordinator worked closely to support each facilitator to develop and think through work plans and design the process and circle questions. Facilitators designed their research questions based on what they wanted to learn and what would contribute to building and supporting ongoing conversations in their communities and networks.
- Discuss with their circles and individual participants what information would come back to MANO, the form of information, and its use for the report and, by extension, its future use.

- Determine the format for their circle/research reports: For instance, reporting included: a recording of the interview (with a summary provided to the circle for review), oral reports (video or audio), conversations with the Project Coordinator as a debrief (recorded or note taking), and summaries with relevant quotes. Any other format that provided both the information that was relevant to the project and respected the direction of the circle vis-à-vis what was to be shared and how was also determined by the facilitator.
- Direct, with input from participants, how MANO's storage of collected research materials, including long-term access to the documents, documentation, and other project materials. We engaged facilitators to think through these questions with us, so that the research would stay in the community beyond the end date of the formal project.
- Ensure that each participant had access to original, or primary, documentation, as well as additional documentation such as any recordings, notes, and other documentation of the circles.[6]
- Track participants so that each was paid $35/hour for their time.

Training and Capacity Building

Facilitators were provided with the following resources:
- Facilitator training workshops, including Field Research and Note-taking in a Good Way with Monique Manatch (ICMI) and MANO staff and Non-hierarchical Facilitation with Nadia Bello.
- Regular team meetings to talk about process, research, facilitation, and other aspects of the project with peers.
- Facilitation guides and other digital resources.
- One-on-one support by the Project Coordinator in whatever aspects each facilitator needed: research question development, co-facilitation, note-taking, summaries, debriefs, administrative

support, thinking through circle process, outreach, and other supports.
- Weekly virtual "office hours" with the Project Coordinator at which time facilitators could drop in to ask questions, check in, or to connect with other facilitators.
- An online Discord channel for information and resource sharing.
- Ongoing sharing of opportunities.
- Assistance with research to support community strategies, pilots, and evaluation processes.

Project Challenges

The exhaustion and fatigue in the arts sector overall (questions about the "crisis of care" in the sector have been raised for some time) has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Under-capacity organizations and vulnerable populations have been more affected by the pandemic than others. We witnessed these impacts through the facilitators and participants, who were often feeling the effects of the pandemic, and who were, pre-pandemic, also overworked (or un/der-employed which comes with other stressors). The pandemic increased their isolation and added to feelings of anxiety about their own capacity to rebound.

This research project is an undertaking that seeks to show both gaps and innovations in the Northern Ontario arts sector. Many of these innovations are responses to gaps in funding, parity, infrastructure, and resources and capacity, but it was complex for a number of reasons. First, it was important to hire facilitators from across the region, each with differing levels of experience as facilitators and administrators/coordinators. Second, flexibility was a large component of the project and research design and included project leads, facilitators, and communities. Third, there needed to be care and fluidity in offering support to and being present for facilitators. Fourth, there were challenges in some of the stages of developing and compiling the research components of the project.

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6   See this section for more about the importance of access to primary documents, ownership and control.

Most significantly, we faced challenges in undertaking the lead facilitation of the project itself. With so many facilitators, experiences, and ranges of relationships in the communities—some very close, and some not at all—we should have considered developing different mechanisms in the project design to support facilitators. The complexity of the project contributed to tensions, and leadership can get things wrong. We weren't fully equipped, and we stumbled. Unfortunately, our mistakes affected MANO's relations with some facilitators, the relations between some facilitators, and our abilities to build relationships into some circles and communities. We would have been wise to have established a third party (beyond the MANO and ICMI relationship) or several advisors, Elders, Indigenous workers, and/or conflict resolution facilitators external to the project lead and external to the established power structure. Such a structure, and advisors—identified by facilitators—would have offered project facilitators and participants safe, respected, and culturally relevant avenues of support. We know we got some things wrong, and we hope that, over time, conversations can continue toward building stronger, more resilient ecosystems in the region.

Impact of the report process

Through the research process, the facilitators (including MANO staff) interviewed 198 people from communities across the North, from Sioux Lookout to Sault Ste. Marie, Pikangikum to Moose Factory, Kenora to Kerns. Our youngest participant was 15 years old, and the most senior was in his 70s. More than 80 of the participants were Indigenous and we were attentive to integrating the realities of disabled artists and artists with lived experience of mental health and addictions. While our project did not have the scope to interview the Francophone media arts community, we did interview several Francophone media artists.

We didn't set out with an established number of communities or locations; rather, these emerged through the facilitator's research interests and networks. One of our findings over the course of the project was that reciprocal clusters develop when there are media arts organizations supported by other arts institutions, along with established artists and a local arts ecosystem. We did, however, want to privilege communities, artists, and organizations that typically aren't invited "to the table." The interviews and the findings therefore represent the experiences of many emerging artists, artists from remote communities, and less established organizations or groups, along with smaller communities and organizations.

Participants included filmmakers, audio/recording artists, sound artists, photographers, podcasters, game arts developers, installation/performance artists, and mixed-media artists from urban, rural, and remote geographies and contexts, and communities from the very north of the region to those along the northeast corridor.

We also involved media arts organizations and other institutions of support that curate, animate, or otherwise support the media arts in some form. These included interviews and discussions with representatives from galleries, libraries, arts councils, media centres, economic development groups, municipal bodies, and educational institutions.[7] Many of the participants and facilitators have connections

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7   Between Pheasants Contemporary (Kearn), 180 Projects (Sault Ste. Marie), Temiskaming Art Gallery, Temiskaming Arts Council, Temiksaming Shores Public Library, ARTEM (New Liskeard), Conseil des Arts Temiskaming Arts Council, Temiskaming Shores and Area Chamber of Commerce, Sault Ste. Marie Cultural Vitality Committee, Schreiber Media Centre, Northern Ontario Research Development Ideas and Knowledge (NORDIK) Institute (Sault Ste. Marie), Near North Mobile Media Lab (North Bay), Post Production North (North Bay), Rolling Pictures (Sault Ste. Marie), Edge Entertainment (Sault Ste. Marie), 180 Sisterhood Productions (Sault Ste. Marie), Shaw TV (Sault Ste. Marie), Borderline Radio (Sault Ste. Marie), UnSalted Audio (Sault Ste. Marie), Casa di Media Productions (Timmins), Weengushk Film Institute (Manitoulin Island), Fuel the Fire TV (Manitoulin Island), New Adventures in Sound Art (South River), Creative Industries (North Bay), Equay Wuk (Sioux Lookout), Mindful Makers (Thunder Bay), and Art Fix of Nipissing (North Bay).

with arts and community organizations that weren't directly interviewed; these individuals brought their experiences with these arts organizations into this research project.

Typically, researchers leave the community with the research. For this project, the researchers are members of the community, and, here, community is not defined strictly by geography. Within this methodology, there is a different kind of investment in the conversations gathered for this project; the interest continues after the project is formally finished. The researchers, like the community members, are involved in a continuous way.

As a result of our circle approach to the research, many of the participants emerged from the conversations with new or renewed connections and new initiatives or activities to test out their ideas and proposed strategies. This is a subtle but significant impact of the research. Typically, research projects are close-ended and scripted in terms of time and range of discussion and are researcher-controlled and findings-driven: here, the participants largely controlled the process and were able to build on community relationships and meanings.

In addition to discussing the particular themes or research questions, participants had the opportunity to learn about each other, share resources, and in a few cases, establish new collaborations. An example that was shared by a participant was the experience that, as a result of the conversation, he felt supported and safe to share his experience with mental health and disability. This translated into increasing his access to the media arts community and finding resources to support him to develop his work. Many facilitators and participants shared that the process contributed to building new relationships and strengthening existing ones. As all but a few of the conversations were held virtually, primarily using Zoom, the project contributed to building informal digital communities. In these ways, the project didn't just discuss issues around control and access but engaged and enacted them.

Community	Count	Community	Count
Animakee Wa Zhing #37 First Nation	1	New Liskeard	1
Atikameksheng Anishnawbek	1	Nipissing First Nation	1
Bear Skin Lake First Nation	1	North Bay	12
Chapleau Cree First Nation	1	Ottawa	1
Dokis	30	Sandy Lake First Nation	1
Dryden	1	Sault Ste. Marie	25
Gore Bay	4	Schreiber	1
Haileybury	7	Serpent River First Nation	1
Honora Bay	1	Sioux Lookout	13
Kagawong	2	Six Nations of the Grand River	1
Kaministiquia	1	South River	2
Kapuskasing	1	Sudbury	4
Kenora	1	Tekhummah	1
Kerns	1	Teme-Augama Anishnabai	1
Lac La Biche, AB	1	Temiskaming First Nation	3
Lac Seul First Nation	7	Temiskaming Shores	3
Lake Helen First Nation	1	Thunder Bay	25
London, ON	1	Timmins	9
M'Chigeeng First Nation	6	Toronto	5
Mississaugas of Alderville First Nation	1	Vancouver	2
		Weagmow First Nation	1
Moose Factory	1	Wikwemikong First Nation	1
Moose Lake	1	Winnipeg	1

1.5 Count of Participant Communities for Interviews

This data is partially mapped on the following page; all participant communities are indicated above. Artists mapped outside of Northern Ontario continue to have roots and relationships to home communities. To view all communities in detail, follow the live map link.

Link to live map: https://tinyurl.com/manoramoDCMAP
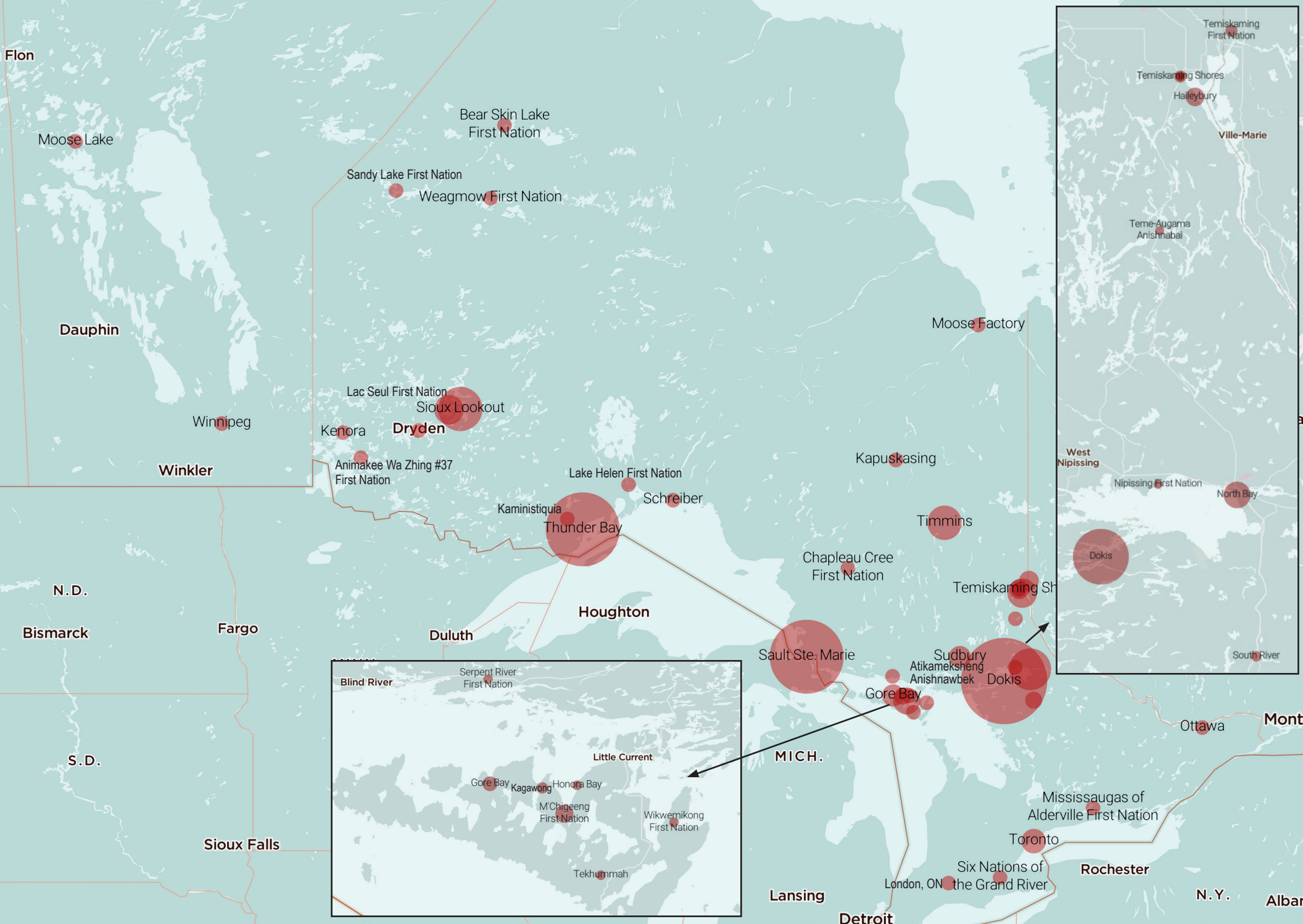
The project not only facilitated research into community control, but the process was designed and structured in a way that provided a great deal of flexibility and control over the interview and research process by the facilitators and the participants. Capacity building was integrated into the process and supported each facilitator in the way they needed and wanted. Essentially, it was important that the research project not be extractive in its design, processes, and results. It was important that the project support existing networks, conversations, and goals, as well as deepen capacity for the work in communities across the region. In other words, we might look at the research as being responsive to existing (if invisible, unrecognized, and/or unpaid) work, rather than communities responding to our request for information.

In addition to the research findings, strategies and suggestions that emerged from the process (summarized here) outcomes included:

• Representatives from the Sault Ste. Marie film circle began to meet more regularly to discuss industry strategies, to find ways to connect emerging filmmakers in the community to the formal industry, and to make their resources (equipment, training, and other support) available. (For more about the Sault Ste. Marie film community, see here.)

• The youth circle participants in the Dokis First Nation process were particularly interested in exploring digital podcasting and community radio and wanted to test the possibilities through a workshop series with a professional podcaster. While it was challenging to establish the workshop —as with the slowdown in retail chains, we've also found high levels of fatigue and capacity challenges with many organizers, facilitators, and other professionals in the sector—we were able to do some background research into existing programs to support the development of Indigenous podcasting and radio stations and programs. (For more about Dokis

First Nations' experiences with digital platforms and their interest in podcasting and digital radio, see here and here.)

• Art Fix of Nipissing had undergone a digital pivot in response to the pandemic. Through this research project, they were able to undertake a formal evaluation of the program with participants and facilitators; as Rémi Alie noted in an email: "Many thanks to MANO, Ben, and particularly to you [Sophie] for supporting research that, for us, was rich, informative, and frankly moving at times." (For more about Art Fix, see our conversation here and their project evaluation here.)

• Perhaps most significantly, participants in the Sioux Lookout circle established the new Minwaajimo Collective, its members a mix of emerging and established filmmakers, photographers, and digital media artists. To test and evaluate the impact of collective-controlled dissemination of work from their region, they worked with MANO to screen a curated series of films through the VUCAVU platform. (For more about the Minwaajimo Collective, see here).

Report

Our participant-driven methodology was conversation based and open-ended. Writing the report required a similar approach. To that end, we decided to rely heavily on the narratives, stories, and voices of participants. The reader will therefore find many direct quotes from participants, including long sections of interviews, and in several cases, the full interview transcript. Many research projects summarize the conversations, providing key points that can often elide or flatten the nuanced experiences of participants. In this region, report after report summarizes a few main challenges: geography and distances, the need for a network and other institutional supports, the need for training and mentorship, and access to spaces to exhibit, perform, and disseminate work. What we have attempted here is to share the nuanced experiences

and approaches, so that communities, artists, and organizations might find a range of responses and strategies within an articulated analysis of the underlying narratives, power structures, and dynamics that affect attempts to organize and address them.

We also heard from communities, such as Dokis First Nation, that research, even well-done research, can sometimes result in the loss of the primary materials through the process of editing and summarizing (and gatekeeping). Through this project we have amassed a significant amount of primary research—dozens of interviews and circles with more than 190 participants, amounting to more than 100 hours of interviews. This material, where and how permitted by participants, has been collected into a database for future use. (We are currently establishing relationships with an archive; please visit our website for links to the archive, expected later in 2022). While this project is not definitive, and many areas require more detailed and lengthy community conversations, the data and the archive we've collected are now available for scholars, organizational leaders, artists, and others in the sector. The research points to the current and future artists, animators, and organizers that lead, inspire, mentor, teach, and build the arts ecosystems throughout the region.

In this digital report, the reader will find a series of case studies that focus on a particular community (geographic or disciplinary), as well as a series of thematic chapters that emerged throughout the process of listening to and learning from the conversations. Each chapter shares experiences (what works and what doesn't, problematic dynamics and inspiring processes) and draws out possible directions, strategies, and approaches to support community control and access. In some cases, quotes are repeated in different chapters because we found that it is difficult to extract one theme from another: many of the issues are entwined. We also realize that many readers may focus on a single theme and so have included repetition of particularly cogent examples and quotes from participants. Where the material might refer to or link with another chapter, we have included hyperlinks.

Each chapter ends with a section titled "What these conversations suggest." The research demonstrated that there isn't a single solution or dominant model that will work for all communities and all artists. We have been hesitant to articulate and argue for set responses. Rather, as noted earlier, we share experiences and draw out themes in an attempt to provide an analysis of the contexts and issues. This offers a framework for artists and organizations to articulate these contexts, narratives, and structures.

Key Findings/What the Conversations Suggest

A summary of suggestions, directions, and strategies is at the end of each chapter and is also collected here. Some of the common themes we found from the research can be placed within the following categories:

- Hybrid and physical/on-the-ground approaches
- Ecosystems, clusters, and virtuous cycles of exchange
- Networks and circulations of visibility
- Institutions of support
- Decentralized relationships and structures
- Informal and formal mentorship
- Education and training
- Equipment access and digital infrastructure
- Hyperlocal and curated responses to global dissemination
- Networked locals and organizing "magpies"

Other research in the region

A number of studies, research projects and reports about the status of the arts in Northern Ontario have been conducted over the last 20 years.

The Breathing Northwinds, Artist-led Sector Planning and Network Development in Northern Ontario (Ortiz, Meades and Broad, 2010, NORDIK Institute) worked with six communities to develop strategic plans and/or consult with the communities, including Elliot Lake, Chapleau, three First Nation communities of Kingfisher Lake, Miskeegogamang, and Summer Beaver, and the Francophone community along the Highway 17 corridor.

The Breathing Northwinds report identified "Major issues facing Northern Ontario artists including: i) cultural identity; ii) network development; iii) sustainability; and iv) capacity building" (2). Findings included the need for networks within the arts community and partnerships across sectors (e.g., economic, social, environmental, tourism); increased municipal support (financial and in-kind) key in developing the sector and building sustainability; and capacity building which includes: individual, organizational, and municipal strategic planning (that integrates arts and culture), lobbying, cross sectoral partnership development, grant writing, arts sector coordination at the municipal/local level, marketing and promotion, professional development, and volunteerism.

The 2015 Community/Arts Education report generated by 4elements Living Arts, through a small OAC Strategic Priorities grant, engaged 16 community/arts educators and organizations in conversation and surveyed educators in Northeastern Ontario. The work identified that there is a gap in community/arts education training for practitioners and noted that there is expertise in the region, but trainers/expertise tends to come from the South. There is a need for co/mentoring via a network of peers and while some form of network or organizing body could assist with coordination, advocacy, and other issues, there are currently no existing organizations that have the mandate, capacity, or representation to do so. The recommendations were not enacted, given the lack of capacity and funding.

In 2021, ArtsBuild conducted research with four communities (Wawa, Sault Ste. Marie, Timmins, and Kenora-Sioux Narrows/Nestor Falls) through funding from the Canada Council for the Arts to explore needs and responses to physical infrastructure, but it was limited in reach (youth and Indigenous communities were less included in the scope of research). However, the *Mapping Northern Creative Spaces* report did identify the need for physical spaces for artists and organizations. Apart from Wawa, the communities expressed a need for multidisciplinary space. Notably, Kenora-Sioux Narrows/Nestor Falls identified underused capacity in film and mixed media. While ArtsBuild supports organizations and communities in new builds, our research, and some of what the ArtsBuild respondents shared, demonstrates that creative, co-operative, and alternative approaches to infrastructure may be preferred and necessary within the context of limited local capacity, long-term maintenance issues, and environmental considerations. In addition, the report noted:

> These points led to a robust discussion regarding the burgeoning success of the northern film industry, due in part, to its network that connects resource people in various communities. A participant from the Timmins Economic Development Corporation mentioned she speaks with film colleagues in Sault Ste. Marie and North Bay on at least a weekly basis. It was suggested a similar network for the arts, culture, and heritage sector be developed. Past efforts to create a northern arts network have been challenging. Factors include limited funding for personnel to lead the initiative; the dearth of paid arts administrators who would have time to take this up; the volunteer and/or and part-time employment of artists engaged in the sector; and lack of internet infrastructure. Participants pointed out the internet connections and peoples' technological capacity have improved, garnering enthusiasm for a network with a suggestion the conversation continue between partners to explore how it might evolve. Caution was also expressed

in relation to workload capacity and ensuring strong local connections were in place to support broader networks. A representative of the Sault Ste. Marie Museum stated that the network "...should be community-based, equitable, grassroots, collaborative and (of course) asset-based." Overall, participants seemed quite eager to meet again to discuss the potential regional network.

—ArtsBuild, *Mapping Northern Creative Spaces* report, 2021.

These suggestions for a networked approach that utilizes collaborative, community-driven/responsive strategies, rather than formal Arts Service Organizations, echoes our findings.

Pat the Dog Theatre (in collaboration with PlaySmelter Sudbury) conducted another 2021 research project through OTF funding. *The Together but Apart: Digital Conference on Touring Theatre in Northern Ontario* brought theatre and performing arts organizations together to discuss collaborative/networked touring strategies in the region. The report is not yet available, but some conversations have suggested that each discipline faces similar challenges and issues. There may be a need and value for multiple disciplines to share research and explore joint strategies for utilizing networks and community spaces, along with booking protocols and platforms. There is a significant lack of capacity in organizations, and the need to work with non-arts partners for touring, particularly in small communities. Developing simple, accessible, and flexible strategies will be important for artists and organizations wanting to reach audiences in the region, particularly those that may not have formal arts spaces. Libraries, community centres, and other community organizations and spaces are increasingly exploring how to diversify their mandates and animate their communities but may not have capacity or interest in navigating multiple platforms to create community access to theatre, music, film, and digital media works.

In 2021, Thinking Rock community arts, with funding from the Ontario Arts Council Strategic Priorities funding and an Ontario Trillium Foundation grant, undertook a year-long research project to identify gaps and needs in the community engaged arts sector in Northern Ontario. The *Stories of Our Stories* project interviewed 17 community engaged practitioners, gathered 19 in-focus groups, and surveyed 17 artists (some overlapping), primarily from Northeastern Ontario (two participants from Thunder Bay and Kenora). Similar issues emerged, such as challenges in sustainability and the need for cultural infrastructure. Nine needs were identified including training, a human resource support network, and relationships/mentoring and support between artists and communities. Further discussions are occurring with the support of the Ontario Arts Council to discuss the potential development of a regional ASO.

The challenge with many of the research projects includes the reach of the research, capacity (and mandate) of the host organization, and capacity to undertake and establish any of the proposed strategies. There are no regional arts organizations with a mandate to organize, build infrastructure, lobby, build capacity, network, or establish and manage investment funds.[8] The only Northern Ontario arts organization is the Northern Ontario Arts Association, whose mandate is to exhibit the work of Northern Ontario artists (primarily painters and sculptors) in communities across the region. However, as we found through our research, a single organization is unlikely to be able to represent the textured complexities of the region or be able to maintain deep relationships across it. Our research suggests that less formal, or more flexible, approaches and structures, rotating leadership, and/or collaborations between communities and organizations (including with

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8   CION Sudbury is the single media arts service organization in the region with a mandate to support the film and music industries, although their reach is limited by discipline and geography. Creative Industries (North Bay) organizes the local arts sector but does not have a regional mandate. NORDIK Institute has a regional mandate but is not an arts service organization (it works across all economic and cultural sectors) and primarily focuses on research, although it has helped establish networks and projects in the past.

existing provincial ASOs) might be better suited to identify and address the nuances of the region. This might help avoid recurrent problems with lack of representation, gatekeeping, and lack of reach into more rural and remote communities.

The Team

Media Arts Network of Ontario (MANO) is a representative of artist-run collectives and organizations across Ontario and supports cooperative ownership of the tools for artistic production, exhibition, and distribution by communities. MANO was founded in 2009 to advocate for and advance the media arts sector in Ontario. In the past decade, the organization has grown to include artist-run centres in visual arts as well as broadening the definitions of media arts activity. Key to MANO's work has been an expanded definition of advocacy that incorporates capacity building and direct support for equitable institution building within the sector. Since 2011, MANO has worked extensively in Northern Ontario, returning to many communities annually to listen to artists and administrators and build networks of trust and mutual support.

MANO has carried out a wide range of projects and research activities including collaborations with regional and national peers. As one of the few arts service organizations regularly working in Northern Ontario, we have provided services to a wide range of groups across disciplinary boundaries. In 2019, we completed two significant multi-year projects: Cold Waters Symposium in North Bay, a conference and festival dedicated to Northern Ontario media arts, and the publication of *Other Places*, a 500-page peer reviewed anthology examining the history of Indigenous, racialized, and queer media artists and groups in Canada. These projects have been rooted in an ethos of finding good ways to work together, foregrounding consent, listening, patience, and mutual responsibility. MANO's work covers a wide range of artistic expressions from analogue film through artist games and virtual reality. In policy

we are involved in numerous research groups within academic and artist-run contexts, including preservation of digital material, copyright and IP, blockchain-based authentication and smart contracts, and new decentralized distribution models. We see digital technology embedded within, and potentially transforming, a broad set of social relationships. Technologies should be specific and tailored to local needs and desires and be rooted in a process done in a good way.

Sophie Edwards, Project Coordinator and Lead Writer, MANO (Mnidoo Mnising/Manitoulin Island) is settler-background poet and environmental artist who holds an MA and PhD (ABD, Cultural Geography, Queen's University). With 35 years' experience in the cultural and community development sectors, Sophie has provided leadership for numerous research, capacity building, networking, training, and advocacy projects with local, regional, and national organizations such as NORDIK Institute, LAMBAC (a community futures organization), the Canadian Cooperative Association, and Women in Social Enterprise Network, among others. She has served as a sessional instructor at Algoma University in the Community Economic and Social Development program. As the founding artistic director and executive director (2003–2017) for 4elements Living Arts, she designed and facilitated dozens of community engaged arts and creative research projects. Prior to MANO, she was the Northeastern Ontario Representative for the Ontario Arts Council, supporting organizations and artists throughout the region.

Ben Donoghue, Executive Director, MANO (Toronto), is a settler-background filmmaker and cultural worker based in Toronto with more than two decades' experience working in the Canadian artist-run media and visual arts. His work has included serving as the Executive Director (2007–2013) of the Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto, where he led major capital projects, and organizational transformation. His tenure as Director of the Media Arts Network of Ontario from 2013–2022 has seen the organization expand to a model of responsive

and engaged leadership in the arts service sector. He has served on numerous boards, collectives, and editorial groups for non-profits, social justice groups, and publications, and has taught film in community settings across Canada.

Adriana Rosselli Londoño is a Colombian-born, Toronto-based arts administrator and visual artist. She holds a BA in Cultural Studies from Trent University and a Diploma in Arts Administration and Cultural Management from Humber College. Adriana currently works as the Membership and Communications Coordinator for the Media Arts Network of Ontario, as the General Manager for Guelph Dance, and as a Program Coordinator for the Hispanic Canadian Arts and Cultural Association.

Chris Turnbull is a freelance writer, editor, and researcher living in Eastern Ontario. She has worked in higher education to develop, coordinate, and collaborate on hybrid distance education and training programs. In this role, she adapted programming to technological limits and possibilities and developed peer mentoring and student support methodologies for community based and online learning.

Facilitators

Anthony Baumgartner (Sioux Lookout/Kenora) is a graduate of the Confederation College Interactive Media Development Program. His interests include 2D and 3D animation and character design, digital art and illustration, video game and interactive coding, and music and audio production. He runs the emergent media production company Surreal Cube Media. His experience in media includes working as the website developer and in-house designer for Thunder Bay Hiring Company Intrideo and acting as Digital Creator North's Program Lead for their Kenora location, where he conducted workshops and hosted drop-in media arts programming for the community.

Drew Gauley (New Liskeard) runs Good Gauley Production, which has provided media content creation and event support since 1993. Drew has also worked on a number of short films and community collaborations, including *Frozen Messages* and *"Air Quotes"* which was presented by River and Sky Festival and DocNorth. *The Junction Creek Clearwater Revival*, which he directed, won Best Editor at the 2011 Music and Film in Motion Awards. An active arts community member, Drew is a founding member of the local arts council (CATAC), a board member of the Temiskaming Foundation, and is a long-time board member of Near North Mobile Media Lab. Prior to moving to Northern Ontario, he worked with production teams at the Toronto International Film Festival and the Royal Ontario Museum. He teaches Interactive Media at Haliburton School of the Arts and Transmedia Strategies at Sheridan.

Jackie Atkins (Manitoulin Island) is a freelance filmmaker, writer, and woodworker currently based in Nelson, BC. In May 2020, she graduated from Middlebury College in Vermont with a degree in Narrative Studies. She has worked with organizations such as Weengushk Film Institute, Fuel the Fire TV, and was a facilitator for their Media Arts Network of Ontario Northern Ontario research project.

Jaymie Lathem (North Bay) is the Executive Director of Creative Industries North Bay Inc., a regional art service organization that supports, connects, and promotes the creative sector in North Bay and Nipissing to foster a progressive, prosperous community. She is an emerging artist based out of Northern Ontario. She studied drawing and painting at the Ontario College of Art and Design and the Alberta College of Art and Design and received her BFA from Nipissing University in 2011. Jaymie remains a practicing visual artist with a focus in drawing and has exhibited work throughout Ontario. Over the past decade, Jaymie has worked in various community-based and creative sector organizations across the Nipissing Region. She currently sits as

Chair of the Public Art Advisory Committee and leads the development of a public art policy for the City of North Bay. She is Treasurer of Tourism North Bay, Co-Chair of Downtown Gallery Hop, and serves on the Art Fix of Nipissing steering committee and the North Bay Community Foundation granting committee. Jaymie has a deep understanding of the unique challenges that face Northern Ontario's creative sector and its entrepreneurial community, specifically when it comes to monetary funding, social complexities and creative sector support, optics, and outside sector education. She has a strong passion for the arts and believes North Bay and Nipissing can be a thriving creative base for Northern Ontario.

Lindsay Sullivan (North Bay) is the Training Co-ordinator of Art Fix of Nipissing, a board member of Creative Industries, a musician, and co-owner of Vox Music Academy. In 2019 she won the North Bay YMCA Adult Peace Prize for her social justice activism. In collaboration with Rémi Alie, she co-led the research and evaluation of Art Fix's digital programming for this report.

Makenzie Dokis (Dokis First Nation) lives in North Bay. Passionate about history and preserving the history of Indigenous communities, Makenzie has worked closely with research projects at both Nipissing University and Dokis First Nation. In her role as a historical researcher, Makenzie reviewed and transcribed historical documents and video interviews with community Elders and Knowledge Keepers. She has also worked as the Community Information Officer for the Kinoomaaziwin Education Body in North Bay.

Nadine Arpin (Sioux Lookout) is a Two-Spirit, Red River Michif director and filmmaker living in Sioux Lookout, where she has been producing short films and documentaries through her company, Cedar Water Films, since 2014. Nadine is interested in telling stories that blur the lines of legend, memory, and truth. Her work uses mixed media, found footage, and animation to create hybrid cinematic experiences.

Her work has been screened at imagineNATIVE, Skábmagovat – Indigenous Peoples' Film Festival, Winnipeg Aboriginal Film Festival, Garifuna International Indigenous Film Festival, and Chicago's First Nations Film and Video Festival. Highly respected, Nadine is a mentor, champion, and inspiration to emerging and established filmmakers throughout Northwestern Ontario.

Rémi Alie (Toronto) is a freelance grant writer, writer, editor, and event co-ordinator based in Toronto. He is an experienced professional in higher education and non-profit arts. He worked with Art Fix of Nipissing as a grant writer and, in collaboration with Lindsay Sullivan, co-led research and evaluation of their digital programming for this report.

Sarah Nelson (Thunder Bay) is an Anishinaabekwe (woman) from Aniimki Wiikwedong (Thunder Bay) and is a citizen of Couchiching First Nation. She has family ties to Lac Seul First Nation through her grandmother. Both First Nations are signatories to Treaty 3. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Indigenous Learning and has an extensive background working in community-based research for organizations like 4Rs Youth Movement, NADF, ONWA, and the City of Thunder Bay. Presently, she is the Northwest Lead for CatalystsX, a national non-profit organization that connects young changemakers to the support and tools they need to thrive in social change work. She volunteers on the Board of Directors for Shkoday which provides culturally based programs for Indigenous children and youth. The Indigenous Future Fund developed through her role as an Advisor for the Laidlaw Foundation in their Reconciliation Strategy. Sarah is also a member, and has played an advisory role, for the Mindful Makers Collective, has worked with Neechee Studio and Earthling Collective, and is a member of the Young Leaders Circle, a collective that connects young leaders to share their gifts and support one another in social change work.

Stacey Hare Hodgins (Thunder Bay) is a facilitator, writer, maker, and social worker who coordinates public education and communication strategies for a feminist non-profit, and guides self-reflective writing workshops on the side. Some of her most meaningful work involved developing and facilitating weekly arts programs for girls and for high school students coping with anxiety, as well as providing artistic direction for the survivor-informed community-engaged projects Honouring Our Stories and the Art of Resistance with the Northwestern Ontario Women's Centre. Stacey also coordinated Jumblies Theatre's Community Arts Exchange (NWO) and is a founding member/instructor of Mindful Makers Collective. In her own arts practice, she explores themes of grief/loss, in/visibility, dis/connection, and family/memory through writing, weaving and crochet. She recently completed an MA in Social Justice Studies; her project, "Islands of Memory: Making feminist meaning of a miscarriage through art and writing" is a creative autoethnography that explores lived contradictions.

Stephen Fox Radoulovich (Kagawong/M'Chigeeng First Nation) is an emerging carver/sculptor interested in the intersections of Odawa design, fractal patterns, and the influence of light and sound on sculptural forms.

Consultants and Collaborators

Indigenous Culture and Media Innovations (ICMI) was created out of a recognized need for Indigenous access to the arts. ICMI opens its doors to the Indigenous community through professional development, projects, productions, facilities, and equipment.

Art Fix of Nipissing is an art collective in North Bay run by and for artists with lived experiences of mental health. Art Fix's members variously describe themselves as mad artists, artists with gifts, artists with extraordinary minds, disabled artists, mentally chill artists, and so on. Art

Fix embraces the diversity of member artists' experiences, and so finds coherence—as a collective—in the principles of respect, equity, and interdependence. By working together, Art Fix members are elevating, inspiring, and otherwise supporting one another's art practices. Among their activities is the development of a game arts project and the exploration of digital/in-person hybrid engagements.

Kim Kitchen is a multidisciplinary artist living and working in North Bay. In 2003, Kim graduated from White Mountain Academy of the Arts in Elliot Lake. Prior to her art education, she worked for years on the front lines of anti- violence prevention throughout Canada. Kim's experience of serving women and children in shelters, rape crisis centres, and prisons, facilitating public education, as well as her international collaborative work, all have greatly informed and propelled her artistic practice. Kim explores the collective cultural understandings at the intersections of the female body as it finds itself in nature. Her community activism is inclusive, celebratory, and exuberant. In contrast, her artistic work is introspective, thoughtful, and prompts quiet reflection. Prior to a life-changing challenge to her mobility in 2014 due to Rheumatoid Disease, Kim's practice was largely tactile focusing on painting, sculpture, and installation. Kim was bedridden for much of the following three years. Her search for treatment resulted in positive outcomes and she returned with a practice that adapted and flourished under new circumstances. Sound art and film lend to her practice of critical inquiry of body-land relations and the self-reflexive relationship between ability and artistic and cultural production as seen through collaboration and community engagement.

Holly Cunningham (North Bay) is a graduate of Sheridan College's Media Arts program with a background in television and film production. Most recently she completed a Fine Arts degree from Nipissing University, which prompted her move to Northern Ontario. Working as the managing director of the Near North Mobile Media

Lab, Holly is actively involved in the arts community of North Bay. She currently sits on the executive board of the White Water Gallery and is chair of Ice Follies Biennial, an exhibition on frozen Lake Nipissing. With an artistic background in video and painting, she is currently focusing her creative energy on releasing her first EP as a professional musician.

Near North Mobile Media Lab (n2m2l) is a member-based organization based in North Bay. n2m2l provides the tools media artists, students, filmmakers, and audiences in Northern Ontario need to produce, present, and enjoy contemporary media arts in all its forms. This includes but is not limited to media installations, filmmaking, video art, animation, documentary arts, and sound production. They provide a rental service of industry-standard equipment at low prices, run workshops, hold screenings and events, and foster a growing community of media artists in the North Bay area. In addition to their downtown North Bay location, they also work from a 16-foot mobile trailer retrofitted with the ability to house an entire production facility from shoot to edit. n2m2l also runs Digital Creator North, with labs in communities across the region supported with staffing and equipment for youth to explore the media arts.

Weengushk Film Institute (M'Chigeeng First Nation) was founded by Dr. Shirley Cheechoo (Order of Canada) in 2002. Accredited through Brock University, WFI provides media arts education and training to aspiring Indigenous and diverse filmmakers, supporting their creative journey and promoting cultural, ethnic, and artistic vitality. Programs include film and television production supported by intensive land-based training.

WINTER CIRCLE:
AYA GOWAMWISIM,
BE CAREFUL

Nadine Arpin, *Jane & the Wolf* (film still) (2016). Directed by Nadine Arpin, produced by Rachell Garrick.

WINTER CIRCLE:
AYA GOWAMWISIM, BE CAREFUL

This Winter conversation was hosted by Nadine Arpin, a Two-Spirit Michif filmmaker from Sioux Lookout. The participants speak about the necessity of care and attention in the process of sharing and recording stories and navigating Indigenous and colonial worlds. Establishing control of Indigenous narratives, and the medium for storytelling, are so important for Indigenous communities.[1]

This research project had several central questions. Among them: How do communities control media infrastructure, and what does that mean? What are the direct and nuanced impacts when digital platforms are controlled from the "outside" and yet define the narrative and the processes, such as distribution and access, in Northern Ontario? Throughout this report, we have drawn out the implications of dominant structures and processes and shared how media artists and organizations in the region are attempting to reframe the narrative and develop their own networks and structures for the creation and dissemination of their art. We have found that media arts and digital infrastructure are important tools for artists in the North. They provide the tools and the platforms for artists to create work from wherever they are in the region—albeit with struggles relating to access to exhibitions, equipment, and distribution.

We have found that artists are navigating complex relations between local and global domains, regional and southern urban dynamics and realities, digital and analogue forms of presentation, and community access and reach. As we see in this Winter Circle, the dynamics—between digital and analogue, virtual spaces and the land, and Indigenous storytellers, narratives, and other power structures—carry significant historical, cultural, and colonial implications. It is clear

from this conversation that it is not enough to simply increase access to existing digital platforms: how these platforms work, how they mediate Indigenous stories, and how they are responsive to Indigenous ways of doing, knowing, and being are important. Who controls the platforms informs how Indigenous visual and digital storytelling is understood and disseminated? Narrative, and its relations to media, is understood differently outside of the (settler) urban South. There are other subtle relationships to consider when we think about ownership. The ownership of platforms or the ownership of creative materials is often tied to the protection of an artist's capacity to earn income and determine how materials are used. In this conversation, however, the control of media and the ownership of content is also attached to access: *who* accesses the materials, *how* is it accessed (not just method, but with what intent/care), and from *where* is it accessed? The circulation of materials has the capacity to further traumatize or colonize, or to heal and empower, northern Indigenous artists. This conversation is not about privileging a pre- or post-tech world; Indigenous artisans and artists have historically been adept at adapting to and using technologies. Rather, in its focus on arts practices, meaning, and ways of using technology from within Indigenous communities and by Indigenous media artists,[2] the Winter conversation repositions what has been traditionally considered the "centre."

Nadine hosted other conversation circles in the Spring, Summer, and Fall. The quotes and ideas from these circles have been integrated into the full report. We felt the entire Winter conversation merited presentation, as it delves into Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies, and shares experiences and stories in ways that we felt should not be cut up or extracted.

For this Winter conversation, Nadine invited Garnet Angeconeb, an Elder from Lac Seul First Nation, who at different points in his life

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1   This transcription was reviewed, amended, redacted, and approved by the circle participants.

2   For more about shifting the gaze from southern urban centres, see here. For more about how artists are navigating digital and analogue spaces, see here.

worked for the CBC, Wawatay News, and other media organizations; Rachel Garrick, an emerging filmmaker from Lac Seul who also worked at Wawatay News; and Tina Munroe, an MA research fellow at Lakehead University and a participating member of RiVA (The Reimaging Value Action Lab).

Nadine framed her invitation to circle participants like this:

> Allow me to preface my questions by first telling you a story of my own. I was recently hired to document a traditional moccasin making workshop. Listening to the Métis Knowledge Keeper, Susan Ledger, explaining the process of moccasins making, I began to see complexity and layers of teaching built into the design for which I had no prior knowledge. Susan spoke about how every aspect of making the moccasin, from harvesting the hide to the stitching of the beads, carries not only life lessons and stories but that the process of creation itself is a form of offered guidance for the maker. As a Métis filmmaker, I felt it incumbent upon me to capture the message Susan was sharing which went beyond the physical mechanics of making moccasins. My priority became weaving her stories and teaching into the foundations of the film's structure. I believe that a non-Indigenous filmmaker may have only seen simple instructions for making footwear and not the layers of generational knowledge which has been built into the holistic act of making a personal article of clothing. And this brings us to our points of focus.

1. As an introduction, can you tell us about your own practice and briefly the evolution of your craft? To what degree, if any, do you infuse your work with your understanding of Anishinaabe ontology? Is it something you feel you can elaborate on in the group?

2. Can you speak to the pressure or expectation some Indigenous creatives may feel is upon them to produce work which carries Anishinaabe content, values, or politics?

3. I once recorded a Knowledge Keeper teaching young single Anishinaabe mothers how to make a drum. When asked why he didn't do his work by hand like the ancestors he remarked, "I am sure if the ancestors had power tools, they would have used them." In your opinion, how can media arts best serve the preservation of stories and language without locking an otherwise fluid and tactile culture in a digital timeline? This includes issues of ownership and access to both pre- and post-production content.

4. Finally, social platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, etc. have created opportunities for Indigenous Peoples to share their humour, politics and stories. Recently Nathan Apodaca, a Northern Arapaho-Mexican man, blew up the socials with his skateboard down an expressway, drinking from a bottle of Ocean Spray cranberry juice all the while lip syncing to Fleetwood Mac, https://youtu.be/OtzVKUCZE5w. I found the clip remarkable for what I assumed was the same reasons everyone else did. Then the BBC 5Live radio announcer, Jim Davis, commented on the extraordinary popularity of the clip by saying he didn't get it: "It's just some guy on a skateboard." For me, the image Nathan created flies in the face of persistent Indigenous stereotypes. What Jim Davis failed to see was a modern-day warrior, with his eagle feather tattooed to his closely shaved skull, soaring down a concrete path on land which most likely holds generations of his own bloodline. Key stakeholders and gatekeepers such as Prime and Netflix continue to produce work that contains disparaging and derogatory content towards Indigenous culture disguised as harmless humour or "making a point." How do we best

harness the power of public media forums to influence and change audience culture and infiltrate the current colonial political dynamic of media stakeholders?

December 9th Winter Conversation[3]

Tina Munroe
Garnet Angeconeb
Nadine Arpin

Tina: It's important to consider how we think about the world. "Multiculturalism" doesn't acknowledge our sovereignty of bodies and minds, as Indigenous Peoples. I'm engaging with challenging why I think certain ways. I interrogate those structures and understand my story better through the process.

Garnet: My Indigenous name means "rebirth under the leaves" in reference to a new generation. I was told by an Elder, "Be careful." It's not the crossing-the-street kind of careful. They're really talking about life's journey. As we journey in this life, *aya gomisiwin* means to take in the teachings and to listen and to learn and to begin to understand over time. It takes a lifetime to understand what the Elders and kookums are telling us. In that sense it is at this stage of my life that I'm beginning to slowly understand what my Elders, parents, and great grandparents taught me. Kookum would almost paint images in the way she told the stories. She said, "Those clouds are talking to us. You can use your imagination to paint a picture." It was a powerful way of illustrating, of conveying those teachings, those lessons. The message that she wanted to convey, especially to young people, is, be careful. That doesn't make sense until we get older. When I think of my mother, grandmother,

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3   Where there are bracketed ellipses, either the participant requested that certain sections not be included, or the person recording the conversation live (the participants chose to not have the session recorded) missed what was being said.

and these great orators, I realized they taught me the art of storytelling when I worked at Wawatay and at CBC in Thunder Bay and Winnipeg. During the time we were telling the stories, my grandmother's way of giving messages came to me, in the way that you want to paint an image, like in radio with the audience. It's unlike television; a lazy medium. I'm using that in a way that there's visual there. In radio you can be creative with sound and paint a picture by using sound. I say that to you because I wanted to illustrate to you the importance of traditional Anishinaabe orators.

Nadine: You brought up the oral storytelling. How do you feel about this—how do you feel about digital storytelling and how it connects to oral storytelling? How do we tell these stories without nailing them in time, or freezing them…is the digital conducive to an idea of Indigenous storytelling?

Tina: I think that storytelling is powerful because it can capture the visual. But we have to consider the ontology of the viewer. In my mind the teachings come in, so in that case it's living and transcends production date. It's a great idea also to see these time capsules and how we related at different times. What was the context that produced this work? There will also be a relationship there.

Nadine: Every time she describes the clouds, it would be different. I wonder if I record it at that time, everyone thinks that's THE story. How can media best represent an oral culture, without getting caught up with linear storytelling…when caught in one perspective? Is visual media a useful tool?

Garnet: You certainly present some thought-provoking discussion here. One of the things I know about our people is that we're gifted at being orators. We are an oral people. Traditionally we didn't have a writing system, for example. Syllabics is not ours. That was brought in by the missionaries. The United Church developed the syllabic system. We

passed on a lot of knowledge by talking to the young people, in an oral way. That is something that worked to my advantage when I worked in radio, to tell those stories. I relied on my natural ability, and using humour. That's another way that we have been gifted. It's a good way of converting what you want to say. The Anishinaabemowin is a beautiful language. It allows you to be creative in telling stories.

When I think about what we've talked about already…the impact of colonization, the ability to express yourself through painting or storytelling or whatever means…it's really, we have always had that natural ability to be able to express ourselves in different ways as Anishinaabe people. To me, colonialism and through the invasion of residential schools there's not one Anishinaabe person that's not been affected directly or indirectly. So, in many ways, the way I've seen, we've always had art. I also know many of our people have been shut down, our voices shut down because of residential schools. Now that people are in the process of healing, if you will, to me it's a process of restoration—where we are restoring what we as a people put on a shelf for a while.

I'm a survivor. It shut down parts of me. What it did was shut down part of my childhood. When I think about my kookum and grandmother and great-grandmother, they were such great teachers, but that was temporarily lost and put on the shelf with residential schools. So, the residential school system put a lot of that on the shelf—we didn't lose it. It was put on the shelf by the role of the state and the role of the church. So now what we have are people who are going back to their tradition, back to their traditional ways of being able to express whatever it is they want to express through painting or whatever. That's part of the resiliency I see with our people. In many ways I see that as part of the restoration, the resilience of our people. I think that's a very powerful way of going back and taking that knowledge that was temporarily on the shelf and taking it off the shelf and being able to express our ways not only with our own people but with the world.

There are different ways of doing that, however you want to talk to the world. That is what it is. Talking to the world and what it is that makes our people resilient. I go back to my mother and grandmother and great-grandmother. My kookum used to say, talk to the animals, talk to the land, for we are all connected. We coexist in the same world. We need to be able to express ourselves as one.

Nadine: The digital medium isn't perfect, but documentation is important in order to hold onto our legends and teachings so that they are passed onto future generations. In your opinion, is archival valuable or limiting?

Garnet: Absolutely. I worked in radio. What I immediately grasped was that in my mind I know the stories that are heard. What I did not do, which I regret, is keeping the recorded versions of those stories. As an Anishinaabe person I hold those stories, I know what I heard, but recording these stories is becoming more important than ever in order to pass them onto the world.

Nadine: Tina, thinking about that autonomy over your own, our own stories, how do you feel about your ability to disseminate what you hear, how do you navigate that idea of protocol and context of where story comes from? How much do you need to integrate that philosophical approach in your writing?

Tina: I'm listening to the natural world. My helpers are always around me. I try to maintain that relationship to Treaty. The vision of my universe, it's important to represent them well. A small s story can become a capital S story. It can elicit change. It can become a helper spirit in its own way. I try to translate well. I'm losing these ideas into the world, and I hope they are caught well by the reader. I consider them offerings.

I used to work at STR archive. They collected TRC records online. What happened is the issue of how we maintain integrity and sacredness of these stories. The archive is alive. We have to keep them alive. They can be triggering. Responsibility is to not control, but to be aware of the effect of the story. If it's not in good soil, it can't take strong enough root. It won't be the original intent.

Garnet: In terms of being able to tell the stories in relation to the residential school legacy, I haven't been able to, there are certain things that still block me from telling stories. I think that's because I'm a survivor. I went to Pelican for six years. I just joined the Survivors Circle at the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation. The kinds of blocks I'm talking about…last summer I came across an elderly gentleman from England. He had in his possession all kinds of pictures from Pelican Residential School. And pictures from Gordon Residential School in Saskatchewan, the last school to close in 1996. Those photographs were treasures to some people. And so when I saw some of those pictures and we were working on getting those back to Canada and where would they belong? I really, really wrestled with that. Where did they belong? Particularly from Sioux Lookout I recognized some former students. I really wanted to show him that photo, but it was not meant to be because he died before it could happen. And that really shut me down. My friend from England wanted to repatriate the photographs back to Canada to their rightful place, because of that incident, because of the young boy in the picture. Tina, what would you say from your perspective, from your experience at the archive?

Tina: I think it's great to have photographs as part of the archive. We had one person from Quebec who came to give names, which is important—not unmarked graves. It's a difficult journey but also a powerful statement. So, families can get more context and see them. Naming is a powerful thing when we were so removed. Because residential schools were a Canadian thing, Canada thinks they have the rights to access the records. We see this with Charlie Wenjack…we had

calls. These aren't public stories. These are fights for survival. There's a child there. There's a people there. There's a nation there. I had a problem with the commodification of the story, of the sacred story.

Garnet: The challenge is how to change from negative to positive through art. I love Gord Downey and his music, and I believe he approached the Charlie Wenjack story with a lot of respect. However, I have a bit of a problem with others have alternative motives. I have great difficulty with it as a survivor. As a survivor we have to be comfortable with those we talk to.

Tina: Tourism. Picking and choosing stories they can digitize. Their road to reconciliation is to hear something, do something. I don't think reconciliation looks like this. You don't have to have access to someone's story to understand that colonialism is back or know we're worthy of […] at the same time it's important for us to tell the stories. We don't have to translate for anybody. My imagination was painted by my mother. I'm writing it to get it out of my body, so it flows through me and exists as an Indigenous perspective of today. It's impossible to suspend that white lens with our Indigenous lens. The white lens is always there because our bodies are political. What that means is to be well enough in mind and spirit to be well enough to write in the first place, let alone to share it with the world.

Nadine: It's a worldview question. Thinking about the viral skateboarder clip: the news coverage was preaching to the converted, that Indigenous Peoples don't exist, not even acknowledging that it was an Indigenous man. No meaning at all.… It became appropriated on a commercial level as well. Weird double impact…it became a bizarre Ocean Spray commercial. What does it mean to use social platforms that are publicly, and commercially funded, free…how do we become visible? We are in many ways, invisible in media and art scenes.

Garnet: I did see my nephew…. When I met his painting, I wondered, what the heck is he painting now? That was my reaction…like this guy with his Ocean Spray cranberry juice…then you sent the email with the YouTube clip and all of a sudden it clicked. In many ways some of that is my natural lack of knowledge and ignorance, but at the same time as I say that, what a powerful way to be able to say, "Hey, us Anishinaabe people, we're okay" and to be able to use the tools of today to send that kind of message. It's a very powerful way to tell a story.

Tina: It's a great video. I think I loved its subversion. Rogan said, "I don't get it, but it's great." But it wasn't for them, it was for his people. We get it. It brought me back to the Prairies. You have time and you have five bucks for a juice. You experience time in a different way. There are roads and infrastructure, but it's still the land. He couldn't have been riding a horse. It challenges stereotypes. It's him hanging out with his kids. It's a healthy relationship. It's sincere. It challenges how we see Indigenous Peoples. Ocean Spray is irrelevant to what it accomplished. It's the embodiment that people…we want to forget that people hate us.

Nadine: People see what they want to see. How do we penetrate that larger world view and the perpetual stereotypes?

Tina: We think a lot about how to dispel this, but it's an exhausting responsibility to have. Even in my career world…I'm going to advance the world, but I'm putting through travel claims…. So why spend so much time to prove that someone with more brown in their skin is equal…? We need to spend more time making these videos. We need to stop having those thoughts all together and just be. Get on your skateboard and go for a ride.

Garnet: I have a different take. I want to stay on topic, but switch from skateboarding and Ocean Spray. But you might have to help me…I don't know the artist from Winnipeg who painted the picture from Confederation…

Nadine: Kent Monkman.

Garnet: So, for me that was a very powerful painting. A very powerful statement but at the same time he offended a lot of people both within Anishinaabe circles and non-Anishinaabe circles. In some ways a guy rolling down on the plains was his way of messaging, and you have this other artist telling the very powerful realities of the situation and the discussion he created and stirred up again. I found that painting very powerful and hard hitting, but also understand Anishinaabequek being offended in such a case.

Nadine: It was very provocative, and he also uses a lot of sexuality as part of his palette…piggybacking on iconic imagery to make a statement. It's confrontational, maybe it's more of a Western approach, attacking…

Tina: He's a very intelligent artist, he does very critical work. It serves any art, to act as a mirror. The reflection can be offensive. Even reading the literature can be difficult. When is the first person going to be raped, or scooped…it triggers, but at the same time, confronting can serve as a catalyst. It can lead to a path of inquiry, but we need to understand that not every reader or consumer is ready. It can be a really interesting catalyst. This is similar to the importance of the Indigenous horror genre…most accurate because we forget that it's a horror. It's almost a documentary. *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* uses horror to share the experience of Indigenous Canada. We can play with the genre in a different way. In the film, the moments when she's engaging with ghosts of her past…. But these are ghosts only in a Western perspective: for us they are also leaders and guides, which makes it not a horror.

Garnet: Another one I really related to was the one with the children being taken away…. Another powerful way of expression.

Nadine: The hammer-on-the-head approach is not necessarily an Indigenous way of dealing with issues. Monk uses paint like a hammer to punch holes in the wall. Using iconic painting techniques of the oppressor to graphically reflect Indigenous reality. How do you feel about that, is it counterproductive if it's confrontational to the viewer?

Tina: There is an assumption that we are supposed to serve something…maybe it's just the artists expressing what they see. Maybe they are more shocking because we run away, hide from…it speaks to the level of which we haven't collectively processed our trauma. There are some really accurate portrayals…

Garnet: The image of children, it's a really powerful painting that I for one can relate to. I can appreciate how that history, that shared history, that contemporary history is being told. At the same time, we do have people today that say it wasn't that bad. We have a Senator inside the Red Chamber who was basically racist, who doesn't believe in the horrors of what went on in residential schools, and so in some ways it leaves us as survivors and as a country to continue to teach each other and learn from each other our collective and shared history. Enter the world of art, and how we best express that. We've got a lot of work to do to educate the Canadian public and the world about colonialism and that's why I mentioned Kent Monkman, being able to tell that story that stirs up a reaction. We need to continue to educate each other.

Tina: Someone said to me that the Charlie Wenjak story was popular because it wasn't boring. The minute that residential schools become boring to Canadians, we have a problem….We think about the hundreds and hundreds of cultures and their kids. There better be a lot of stories and painters. The diversity of how people express these histories tells us about our levels of engagement with the stories and speaks to the state of affairs at the time between individual and the state.

It isn't about the reader, it's about the survivor.

How can I get into that person's mind…? How they choose to express it tells me about that person, their relationship with the natural world, their relationship with themselves…even if looking at a film, what is the film saying? All these different characters are present. And silence is powerful. And what do the silences say?

Nadine: Would you say that art is inherently political?

Tina: A political body in the Canadian state. We're all citizens, paying taxes, so we're inherently political, and ontologies are inherently political. How I translate that to others through my work…I try to be as political as I can 'cause that is my responsibility.

Garnet: One way I think about Indigenous Peoples expressing through art is that I look at our people as going through a process of grief in terms of what has happened to Anishinaabe people through contact, through the Indian Act, and through Treaties, and so on. Those kinds of things are so foreign to our traditional ways. In many ways we are going through a time when we are acknowledging that we are grieving, and that process is told by way of art. So, I just really think of Anishinaabe artwork as, we haven't seen anything yet. As we go through a restoration and reconciliation process. (I wrestle with the word reconciliation… it's jargon…20 years ago the jargon of the day was self-governance.) I believe we can best express ourselves through healing.

Nadine: What system changes have to happen to be able to hand over autonomy for people to tell their stories, and not have to live in an urban centre to tell that story.

Garnet: This is where the spirit of resiliency comes in. We need to frame what we mean by healing. The way I look at communications in general is that as Anishinaabe people we need to centre ourselves. What we mean by healing, what we mean by going back, and searching, and being resilient. I really rely on the Knowledge Keepers. In many

ways we have the tools at our hands to unite the Indigenous Peoples through the arts. Back in 1985, for example, we had a delegation of Australian Indigenous people visit us to see how we were documenting and archiving materials based on our Anishinaabe language. They came and saw, and they themselves showed us what they were doing. They were really big on recording musicians and so on. And so what it is that we need to hang our hat on? Is the spirit of resilience and healing holistically, particularly spiritual healing? There will come a time when Indigenous knowledge will play a role in healing the world. Ten years ago, I heard an Elder say, "Pay attention, the time is coming." And here we are. We need to listen.

Tina: This goes back to what you were saying about "being careful." Younger storytellers, a new generation, we need to help them build capacity to dream for themselves. We forget that our Elders were dreamers. Life is what creates Elders. Empower them to make their own stories. Not just to go online and see others' stories. Grow our storytelling practices. We can ride a skateboard and drink juice and still tell a story. Doesn't have to be cool. Build by being mirrors, encouraging them to let it out, to play.

Nadine: The fluidity of Indigenous culture.

Garnet: When I listened to you frame that question, I couldn't help thinking about when I used to go to the northern fly-in communities before the time of the air strips and telephones. Very isolated. It was an awesome time to see how these communities came together in their environment. Didn't have outside distractions. Traditional way…I mean they lived day to day to survive. We can look at that, where we come from. I'm talking about 40 years ago now. And I was involved in communications development in places where there were populations of 500. We helped to bring in CBC services—radio and television, basically—a national service that everyone took for granted, but in the north, we didn't have it. I saw that concern for the Elders. What

impact will it have on our Elders, our languages, our culture? Will we be changing the way we exist? In many ways we were challenged with: How do we counterbalance the advent of television and radio services? We began to see community radio stations. We were told, bring all this in but don't lose our culture because that's the basis of our existence. Those threats have run away on us now. We have lost control. Everybody is sitting there with the scrolling devices. What does this do with our ways, especially our young who are losing their language, the stories of kookum and mishomis and so on.

And once again here we are with some threats at our doorstep, and that's technology, and so I go back to what the Elders said: It's okay, we can't stop the technology from coming into our lives and so what do we do to hang on to what we have? Enhance our stories and our languages and recordings of our knowledge and traditional teachings and so on. And what the Elders said was use the tech that we have and use it wisely because it can be a threat and be used against us. In our own way, meet the challenges of our Elders so we don't erode our teachings, use our modern-day tech to our benefit. How do we frame that? I use the word resilience—using whatever means we can. We can use modern-day tech to sustain and maintain what the Creator has given us. How do we frame that? I'm sure other Indigenous societies around the world are facing the same challenges, the same threats. We need to think about the word *Aya gomisiwin*, "be careful." That's what I would tell young people today.

Nadine: Being care full. Being thought full about how we use technologies to tell the stories and preserve.

Tina: We were in Grassy Narrows. We invited people to come to the centre and pour out their stories. People need to know their stories would be planted somewhere safe. We forget the value of the everyday story. We look for something epic. Sometimes it's the day-to-day story, to bring the storyteller back to the smells, the experience. And to know

we care about you, not just the stories. And we don't all tell stories the same way. These are not nations the same way that Canada is a nation, very different ontologies, every one is different.

Nadine: It makes sense to have their own autonomy to tell their own stories in their own ways, and to provide capacity.

Tina: We need to build a storytelling practice. Why do we stop telling our stories? We need to tell the smaller stories to get to the bigger stories. Get used to the sound of our own voice. I could say the things nobody was asking me. Why don't we ask each other…we're missing the tradition of having tea with each other. Small talk is a gateway, you get to know someone. I'm inviting you into my mind, my world. This is an ability; I'm inviting you in behind my eyes. Then I trust you and then we can go deeper.

Garnet: I go back to the word *Aya gomisiwin*, "be careful." One of the things that as a survivor is to be more careful in terms of how we relate to the outside world. In many ways we did lose our ability to trust. When I look at the history of Northern Ontario, we helped build relationships to the art world. In many ways I was always careful when going to interview an Anishinaabe person so that they were properly recognized and not just taken. And that's so important. When I talk about reconciliation it's about doing business in a different way that is good for Anishinaabe people and good for non-Anishinaabe people.

Nadine: How do we build trust?

Garnet: I'm not really sure. But that's the kind of thing that needs to be put in the work that we do and in the work of reconciliation. It's something that's evolving as we sit here and talk and it's something we always have to be mindful of. Let's not have history repeat itself. Chart a course that's on the right path.

Tina: We're all still learning to trust ourselves and to have a relationship with the natural world. Beyond the temporary story of empire. We need to trust there is something beyond, which helps me trust people more. How to build trust is a case-by-case basis. We're still trusting ourselves. It's a question for the allies.

Nadine: We need to look at things more holistically. Not only what is visible matters.

BEING CARE-FULL:
RESEARCH, STORY
COLLECTING + SHARING
IN A DIGITAL WORLD

Nadine Arpin, *Anna Lisa* (film still) (2017). Directed by Nadine Arpin, produced by Rachel Garrick.

BEING CARE-FULL:
RESEARCH, STORY COLLECTING
+ SHARING IN A DIGITAL WORLD[1]

It's really hard, because we're not like that. That's not part of our DNA. We talk to people. We'll listen to stories, and we respect that. We don't use it in not in a good way.
—Gerry Duquette, *Ogimaa (Chief), Dokis First Nation*

It's not good intentions, to just sit down, grab information, and then go.
—Makenzie Dokis, *Dokis First Nation*

I worked in radio. What I immediately grasped was that in my mind I know the stories that are heard. What I did not do, which I regret, is keeping the recorded versions of those stories. As an Anishnaabe person I hold those stories, I know what I heard, but recording these stories is becoming more important than ever in order to pass them onto the world.
—Garnet Angeconeb, *Elder and former broadcaster, Lac Seul First Nation*

My Indigenous name means "rebirth under the leaves" in reference to a new generation. I was told by an Elder, "Be careful." It's not the crossing-the-street kind of careful. They're really talking about life's journey. As we journey in this life, *aya gomisiwin* means to take in the teachings and to listen and to learn and to begin to understand over time. It takes a lifetime to understand what the Elders and kookums are telling us. In that sense it is at this stage of my life that I'm beginning to slowly understand what my Elders, parents, and great grandparents taught me. Kookum would almost paint images in the way she told the stories. She said, "Those clouds are talking to us. You can use your imagination to paint a picture." It was a powerful way of illustrating, of conveying those teachings, those lessons. The message that she wanted to convey, especially to young people, is, be careful. That doesn't make sense until we get older. When I think of my mother, grandmother, and these great orators, I realized they taught me the art of storytelling when I worked at Wawatay and at CBC in Thunder Bay and Winnipeg. During the time we were telling the stories, my grandmother's way of giving messages came to me, in the way that you want to paint an image, like in radio with the audience. It's unlike television; a lazy medium. I'm using that in a way that there's visual there. In radio you can be creative with sound and paint a picture by using sound. I say that to you because I wanted to illustrate to you the importance of traditional Anishinaabe orators.—Garnet Angeconeb

Many of the Indigenous circles were emphatic about the role digital media can play in preserving stories, transferring cultural knowledge, and engaging members in the culture of their communities—not only to mitigate the isolation that came with the stay-at-home orders during COVID and for those with mobility issues, but also to address a range of needs, including the distances of off-reserve band members from their home communities. Circles talked about a range of digital and hybrid approaches that can ethically accommodate and protect cultural knowledge and its transfer while also adapting to COVID protocols.

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1 To write this section, we focused on the quotes and stories shared in the circles, so that the voices of the participants are at the forefront, rather than providing our (MANO's) interpretation. All participants decided, in their circles, what would be shared, and what wouldn't. They had the option to record or not record their sessions, and were given copies of all recordings, notes and other documentation. Participants reviewed this section and revised or redacted it. They have the option to request that their information, quotes, or stories be removed at any time. We have permission from the participants to share this document with all other participants, the arts community, funding organizations, and others in the cultural sector. As we cannot control how digital documents are circulated, we request that care is considered when sharing, downloading, or otherwise disseminating the documents, and to seek permission from the participants for re-use and dissemination.

Dokis First Nation and the participants in their community's conversation circles, like Garnet Angeconeb, are aware that recordings are a way to preserve local stories, history, and culture. They may also assist in cultural transfer through online tools and platforms. Video could offer a way, as a proxy form, to continue to engage Elders on the land when they can't be present in person.

> I feel like that would help a lot. I feel that for the youth and then also the elders that it gives them a sense of, you're still connected, even though you're not out there. But you're still there and you're able to learn and to be involved in these sorts of things. Especially for people that even without COVID can't leave home, for different types of illnesses and disabilities.
> —Makenzie Dokis

The Dokis circles also discussed how digital media and digital platforms can help them expand and enhance programming at the Dokis Museum, which houses many artifacts and records from the community.[2]

> At the museum they have these scanners on the walls that they're trying to fix up, where if you were to scan it with your phone, it would tell you a story about this canoe or something like that. Instead of just walking through a museum and they say, "Oh, yes, this is old, this is old school," actually have a conversation about it, or even have an interview about Dokis, about how they came here and all that. —Makenzie Dokis

While Makenzie notes the immediacy of a QR code method for community members and others to benefit from digital access to cultural materials and records, the circles noted that digital media and platforms, overall, could offer practical kinds of engagements for the

public because it would allow remote access to museum archives and exhibitions through the use of video and pre-recorded content. It's not just a simple enhancement of the "what" being viewed but expands the "how" of the viewing. Recording and research has been historically problematic because stories, material culture, and teachings have been extracted from the community—sometimes stolen or sometimes taken with permission but without a shared understanding of what that permission means. These extractions remove the context, the "livingness" of the story or object, the relations between people, and between people and the material. The living knowledge and its depths, and how this knowledge is dynamic and integral for the community, both in memory and in the day-to-day, is removed.

> We lost so much. We lost our sacred bundles. So many people died trying to protect them. They don't understand those bundles are more than a physical object. It's pretty amazing we still are having to protect those things.
> —David Wilkinson-Simard, *Northern Ontario Regional Coordinator, Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance, Thunder Bay*

And as an Indigenous artist, this debacle of Michelle Latimer and *Trickster* has really affected me. First, I felt like shredding someone to pieces was not the right approach to take. Then I heard that she was horrible to people on set and miserable to work with. It was Joseph Boyden all over again. All she had to do was tell the truth. I don't know that it's changing my art so much as it's changing how I think about my art. The common element in colonial thinking is to go throw money at it (like the CBC and NFB in response to TRC) without any parameters. The onus is on the funders to clearly identify artists when developing a program. There's still a really fierce colonial mindset around who we are, what we are. Like "culture under glass" where you're singing, dancing, beading. People don't wanna let go of that concept. We're trying to break out

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2 For a more in-depth read about Dokis's digital thinking, particularly in terms of podcasting and community radio pilots, see here.

of the Hollywood tropes. It [the Latimer issue] brought up a conversation in our collaborative storytelling for film and media work, about being careful. Political correctness, respect, and artistic licence are all colliding. I'm affected in a good way and a bad way.

—ElizaBeth Hill, *singer-songwriter and multidisciplinary artist, Mohawk from the Six Nations of the Grand River Territory, Thunder Bay*

In another circle, hosted by Sarah Nelson in Thunder Bay, the participants discussed what a decolonized curatorial practice, particularly in virtual spaces, might look like. Not only does this mean that Indigenous art, artifacts, and knowledge is curated by Indigenous curators, it also means that protocols and the dynamics of what is shared is established by complex and very local relations.

> There are a lot of different protocols for different tribes. There are a lot of sovereign nations—630 First Nations in Canada, 560-some tribes in US Mexico, and this does not cover the southern part. There are 260-some Indigenous groups out there. There are a lot of protocols out there. Cheyennes don't do things like our neighbouring tribes. We all do things a lot differently. —Anonymous

> An example: The drum is considered one of the first sacred items. One school wanted a drum for their school and they asked someone to make a drum. A lot of the kids wouldn't sit at the drum because you need permission. The non-natives didn't understand protocol. The students with parents or grandparents talked about this drum. You have to take care of it. You have to have a drum keeper who takes care of it and if you don't do those things the drum will die. …It's very important when we're talking about programs, adopting places and spaces, that it is not just a show. Here's a drum. Now it is indigenized. At the

end of the school year the caretaker takes care of that item and then passes it on. They had a mentorship program to learn how to take care of the drum. So, it became a community event. It wasn't just a tool. —David Wilkinson-Simard

It also means that the work isn't simply displayed—or put "on exhibit"—for consumption, the focus is on the story and the history of the object/work. The gaze isn't necessarily external to the community.

> It's a European concept, museum curators, art curators. Those are all European concepts. As Anishinaabe people, Mi'kmaq, Cheyenne people, we have the common thread of storytellers, we talk about our history. When George and I were talking last week, we were talking about the history of where we come from. I can connect to him because of the places where his people come from. I know those places. That's how we share our history…we are the storykeepers. —David Wilkinson-Simard

> Identifying ourselves by ourselves by our own people, that's what I found. It's a common thread right across all the tribes. This concept is going right across the country. We don't want to come into someone else's territory and say this who you are and what you do. —David Wilkinson-Simard

Lineages, kinship, relations, and history have integrity and fullness that is missing from many approaches. Instagram and other social media platforms provide quick visual snapshots of moments, objects, and people, but they are less able to provide a fuller history with these stand-alone images. The speed of the internet translates into the speed at which we consume images. In a more decolonized visual arts or media arts experience, time slows down. The time to create, look, learn, listen "not expecting all of the answers given to them right then and there" (ElizaBeth Hill).

An "indigenized" virtual exhibition might include interviews with the artist and stories and conversations shared about the art and the objects; the exhibition would intrinsically be attuned to the protocols of each community from where the work, particularly cultural knowledge and teachings, originates.

> We talked about this too [in our conversation circles], how our artwork always had a purpose. It wasn't just for, I mean, it was beautiful, beautiful things are made, but it wasn't just to put up on a wall. And it almost reminds me of the culture, how it's a living, breathing thing that you have to continually nurture. And work at. It's almost like the art is kind of like that with Indigenous people. It's kind of more, it's more a part of us.
> —Sarah Nelson, *Thunder Bay / Fort William and Lac Seul First Nations, Northwest Lead (Project Manager), CatalystsX*

Social media and other digital platforms have fairly successfully translated workshops in performance, singing, crafting, painting, and other practices from analogue into online spaces, and have allowed people to connect and dispel some of the isolation brought on by COVID and geographical distances, but these platforms do not replicate the lived experience, the on-the-ground relational exchanges. And some artists prefer to show in physical spaces: "I don't like my stuff online." —ElizaBeth Hill

> There's no other way to tell our story, you have to see, hear, and feel it. …The electronic world will always fail; the strength of building networks will help us overcome those things.
> —David Wilkinson-Simard

> With storytelling, it's very important, when you talk about protocol, that media platforms are used in a good way. How do you ensure something like what Jordan's sharing, that that story doesn't get twisted? That has to be something to consider. The

other thing about digital platforms. There was a group back in the 1980s Cult when they changed their entire format to digital, had guitar track, drum track, lost entire drum track when they changed over, lost, gone. There has to be a mechanism in place for massive copy to be archived in its highest form.
> —David Wilkinson-Simard

> There are ways to use digital technology to respectfully share Indigenous intellectual property and sacred teachings. Jacob Thomas, the late Cayuga Knowledge Keeper, caused quite an uproar among his peers when he decided to allow himself to be videotaped reciting the sacred Great Law of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy. He defended his decision by saying, "We can't complain that people know nothing about us if we don't share some of our culture and stories with them." Digital media tools can provide Indigenous peoples the ability and opportunity to be more creative. I know of several initiatives where animation is being used by educators to share Indigenous teachings with the willing cooperation and participation of Indigenous Knowledge Keepers. These partnerships are based on trust that the information will not be exploited or appropriated but shared in an authentic way. In this way, the oldest Indigenous stories can be told using the newest technology, with the tellers remaining in control of how, when, and where they are shared.
> —Maurice Switzer, *President, North Bay Indigenous Friendship Centre*

Considerations about data are complex and involve material elements like technical transfer, storage, and data quality. They also involve management with respect to human and cultural elements, such as control of the data, and understood protocols about access and use in the short and long term. Parameters are important, as data circulates or is captured once it is available on the internet.

We have a research grant that is going to provide the museum at Dokis First Nation with a server. And the intent of that is to store all of our digital media, photographs, historical documents, any of the research and media that is available from our members. And with that it's one thing to push certain videos online, say on YouTube, or things that are publicly available through Facebook, I know that you could create a group, then you could control to a certain extent access to those videos. But what I intend to do is have this server offline. The content, all of that information, will be internal to the museum only. So, individuals that would like to view, of course, through permissions, content that is permitted. To view those videos, they would have to be at the museum in person. That was the intent prior to COVID. But again, that kind of came to a standstill. But we do have the funding to purchase that server. So, with that is part of this research and ethics policy has well, to a certain extent incorporate the use and access and basically regulate the management of that data.
—Randy Restoule, *Dokis First Nation*

The pandemic has created problems. Dokis First Nation, for example, had decided to maintain records for in-person access only, but pandemic protocols have pushed communities to think about access in different ways. This raises further questions about access for those who can't access, or can't easily access, physical spaces outside the bounds of COVID considerations.[3] Elders, disabled folks, and band members living off-reserve have found that the digital pivot has helped increase their connection to their community, especially if they have internet (where it's available). A hybrid physical/digital approach makes access sense, but it makes control of the data and the content much more difficult.

The creation of materials, and how recordings and interviews are conducted, contain additional complexities for community members when considering ways to ensure (and reassure community members) that the stories and other material will be protected if placed in a digital space.

I do understand how to have certain controls, but I don't know how to say it. But to have that protection of those stories and the protection to the person telling it, to make sure they feel comfortable, or they're willing to share, and they know that their story is not going to be…just reassurance. Part of our protocols is to reassure people that what you're giving us, the gift that you're giving us, will be protected in this way, or we'll share it the way you want us to share it. And if you don't want us to share it, well, we will respect that also. And I think that you'll have more of that interaction with people, whether it's how they do their painting, or how they speak a word, or how they give a story or how whatever, the part they want to give us how they will be protected. I think that there has to be a certain control. So, it isn't just given to anyone or it's not going on to social media and just out there in the world, because there are certain things that are sacred to us and to the people doing it. And I do believe that part of that ethics is just our own responsibilities. Sometimes we see it in a big document that outlines how we have to do it because of legality. But I think personal ethics goes a long way too. How you want to do, or how you perceive, or how you would want to be treated, or how you want your gift to be portrayed. —Gerry Duquette

Gerry Duquette, Makenzie Dokis, and Randy Restoule discussed their process of interviewing Elders in the community, what it means to be respectful of that process, and what permission means. While a permission might be granted for an interview, stories might be shared within that context that are not for sharing. So while someone may

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3 For further reading on access, see Dokis podcasting and disability section.

have given permission for that interview based on what they expected to be asked, interviews are never straightforward or linear tellings, and may go into territory that was unexpected. How the information is interpreted and shared may or may not reflect the original meaning. This is where the relationship to the community, to the teachings, to the person being recorded, and an ethical approach to interviewing becomes so important, and helps inform what is to be shared and what is to be unshared. It may be, too, that permission isn't permanent. How do communities maintain their responsibility to the materials, and to the person who shared them, when the permissions are short term, but yet have a digital life?

> Ethics becomes important, an important discussion, and part of those interviews. It [a written permission] needs to clearly state the use and the purpose, the reproduction of that media. You need the authorization of the individual that's being interviewed to grant those permissions. —Randy Restoule

> I do believe it depends on what the person is saying. It might just be information that happened on her land, or it could be in a personal nature. Because you never know, I've done interviews too. I've talked to some of our Elders and sometimes it's not even what you ask, but they want to tell you something, and you're not sure— what do you do with that? What do you do with that information? I've come across that thing. Okay, they told me that, but it was not for sharing, because it was something that they wanted *me* to know. So, I think [it's] the realm or the subject matter you know, if it's just saying this is how I take pictures or photograph because the sunlight in it brings out this tree in this way, or this is how we paint, and because it's predominant west winds, my trees are bent on that side. I think that type of information is great to share for its factual reality, or you can have an understanding of people's eyes or what they see before they actually put something on canvas. —Gerry Duquette

In the moment, that person had to share that with you. And now it's forever with you. So that's why I really liked doing these—I don't like to call them interviews. I just like having a conversation with you. That's how I like living it, not really labeling it. So, I would say ethics would be the top one—you have to try to make sure this person wants to speak to you, but also, that you have this information and be able to share it. But make sure they're okay with you sharing this information. —Makenzie Dokis

Sometimes when you sit down, sometimes it's teachings that you're receiving, and they might not say it outright, but if you pay attention to what they're saying, sometimes those teachings are not to be reproduced or recorded or given out because it was given to you. And maybe sometimes it's a question to say, "Can I share this? Or is this for me?" I think when you do share, it's a gift. And I think if we appreciate it and we were knowledgeable or cognizant of that. It's like, "Okay, well, opportunity came to me, and they shared that with me, and I respect that." I don't think anybody in the group would do anything to be harmful, so I'm not worried about that. It's just sometimes people want to just do things for their own personal gain. —Gerry Duquette

If I was to be interviewed, I would want to know, I would need to clearly understand, what is the purpose of the interview? What is it going to be used for? Where's the information going to be published? And what is going to happen with that information after the project is completed? So, ownership as well, ownership and beyond, ownership, recognition. As Gerry mentioned, recognition of those contributions as well is an important feature. —Randy Restoule

I do believe what Randy is saying that the ethics of it depends on the person telling the story. We had the same situation about what are medicinal plants or medicines, and some say, "No, I don't want

to share this because you're going to get sick, or you've got to do it right. And there's a proper way of giving thanks to that plant that is going to provide that medicine to us." And there's also that fear that you're, there could be, well, it happens all the time, that our medicines are sold in the market. And people, or pharmaceuticals make our medicines, and they take off with it without that recognition. So, I think those are the part of the ethics that want to protect you and protect the individual saying or telling us their story, or even for artists, they might have some secrets of how they create their art. But it'd be up to them to either share or say, "Okay, this part I'm not sharing, but I'm going to share this part." So, it could be a signature, I hate signatures, we have to do them all time. But acknowledgments, yes, I give you permission to reproduce it or to share to our people. And there could be some times that people are doing stuff and you want it for Dokis members only. And that'd be their choice. —Gerry Duquette

Sometimes some of us give interviews and you're on CBC Radio, or you do something. And you're like, "Ah, I answered these questions. But that's not what you said, or that's not how I would portray it. And that's not what I meant." So, I truly understand or appreciate what you're saying—if we're doing a video [editing], and somebody is giving you time, and you do have to do it because there's going to be lengths of time are different, words or sounds. And then to show them again, and say, "Okay, this is what I came up with, is this, okay?" —Randy Restoule

These perspectives were resonant in other circles too.

If I record a grandma telling a story, does it mean the same thing now as it did when a child was hearing it? Not necessarily, but that does not necessarily diminish the value of those recordings or that documentation. And that's what I understood from Garnet Angeconeb. As long as we approach it with the same sort

of respect and understanding that it's not just about going in and *taking* that story…running away, and going, "Look what I got." That word from Garnet—*ayagosumsiuk*. There's a respect for the whole thing. It goes back to that holistic approach, a balanced approach to everything, and acknowledging the spirits and acknowledging the voices in your head and acknowledging your guts and how you feel, and being respectful to both your subject, but also to yourself too. You need to come at it from a good place. —Nadine Arpin, *Two-Spirit Michif filmmaker, Sioux Lookout*

What happens with work once it has been made is of consideration too: who controls or has access to the recordings, documents, notes, and other content that might not have been included in the final recording, video, or other work? Dokis First Nation experienced this through the development of a video—a video that they screen regularly in the community and that has meaning for them, but the edited content and the research files are equally important.

That Eagles on a River video…. We flew in Mr. Mortimore, who was the narrator or the interviewer who lived in our community for over a year. Unfortunately, he passed away. I was trying to see…because it was the outtakes of the whole year. Many times, we play this video at seniors gatherings or a Christmas dinner. And it's always said, "Oh, there's another person that passed away, or there's another, or people are seeing their loved one speak." You can see their emotion, whether they're happy, laughing or crying. And so we wanted to reach out to the university. We did. We got the runaround from this department, that department. We wanted those outtakes because—there might be an hour video—but there might be hundreds of hours of video tapes, interviews, and things that didn't make the cut. So, we were looking to bring it back home, and then not to reproduce, not to say, you know, we're gonna make another video, but just to say, this is what we want, you

know, for those loved ones to actually see them speak again, or laugh, because there's some funny stuff in there. It is something that, you know, I don't want to give up on. It was unfortunate that it maybe just comes to be that I take a ride down there and say, "Hey, I demand these recordings for our community. And that's it. And I'm not leaving." Oh, I don't want to be that way. But sometimes, that's what has to happen. But I think for the respect of our people, that's our ownership. And that's our people speaking in the videos. —Gerry Duquette

Many researchers and universities conduct research in First Nations communities or have materials from the communities in their archives. When asked about university ethics processes and protocols, Randy Restoule noted:

> It's my experience with the university that they're definitely written entities to protect the university's interests. I actually went through a research ethics review on a past project, and it's part of a case study write up that I'm preparing for the research ethics group, advisory group, for consideration, and just based on experience and everything. But this research ethics review took place back in 2009. At the time, I was the staff representative on the research project. And the research ethics review began with Nipissing University. I got a call one day to say that "I'm so and so from the university and, you know, we're conducting a review," and there was a whole series of questions. Basically, they were asking what were my qualifications to be able to conduct interviews in the community. I was like, "I was born and raised here. I'm a member. I lived here all my life. I'm staff, working for the First Nation." You know, what other qualifications do you need, right? So, it definitely wasn't for our interests. I guess it was more for their protection. And at the time, I didn't even consider research ethics from the First Nation perspective. So that's where, through those years of experience now, I

understand fully the importance of having our own policy to be able to protect the use of data. And the ownership of the knowledge that is shared through these projects. So, it definitely wasn't a pleasant experience. I said today, I still don't even know what the outcome was. You know, I was never provided a summary report during the follow up. It's just, they did the interview, asked me all these questions. And that was the end of it. —Randy Restoule

Because there is a history of misappropriation, theft, and misuse, as well as misguided and misinformed use and claims of materials and knowledge, First Nations are finding they need to develop written protocols.

> We need to have a process to be able to authorize the production and the use of those videos in the future. —Randy Restoule

> I don't like that word "ownership." It puts a rigid board.… [It's] about the protocols, respecting what it is. There's a lot they [settlers] don't know about why we do things the way we do. Because we wouldn't share it. Part of the reason this is bothering me, this is a common element across Canada, NSI. Latimer. You could take it as far back as Joseph Boyden. Where again an outside resource is determining parameters…because they never seem to make them in the right way. —ElizaBeth Hill

> I've been in lots of platforms, in marches…marginalized, part of the 60s Scoop, children's aid…powwows, drumming, helping people. When you get older you return to a lot of that. I got to travel with Senator Sinclair, I got to talk to him often. What came back to me, you have to control your own knowledge, your own message, is the way I was taught. —David Wilkinson-Simard

I think that's maybe what Garnet is talking about—that fine line. Maybe it's about understanding your motivation and being certain of what you're doing, when you're making work, whether it's writing or oral, visual…whatever you're creating, you come from it with your eyes wide open. —Nadine Arpin

Where you gonna stand? Where you gonna do things? What we need to know about, and how to go about it? What to be cautious with, and who you gonna be working for? It's all common sense. How you going to speak for the people? — Jordan Quequish, *Thunder Bay, Anishinaabe artist*

Resources

To learn more about on-screen protocols for working in Indigenous communities, see: https://store.imaginenative.org/collections/publications-collection/products/on-screen-protocols-pathways.

To learn more about OCAP: Ownership, Control, Access and Possession, see:
https://fnigc.ca/ocap-training/
https://www.afn.ca/uploads/files/nihbforum/info_and_privacy_doc-ocap.pdf.

Institute for Research Design in Librarianship (IRDL): "The IRDL Scholars Speaker Series is designed to shine a spotlight on voices and ideas that challenge traditional ways of conducting research. It surveys various topics, including specific research methods and critiques of processes associated with western social science approaches, with the intention of inspiring research explicitly rooted in social justice. As librarians, educators, and researchers, we welcome this opportunity to reflect and incorporate what we learn from these speakers into our own research efforts, so that our methodologies integrate anti-racist and anti-colonial practices." This series of webinars is available via YouTube. Topics include, Storying research practices, De/colonizing research practices, Critical Race Spatial Analysis.

To learn more about Dokis First Nation's collections protocols and story projects, see:
Collections protocols
Taking Care of Our Stories Project

4

VALIDATION + VISIBILITY
IN DIGITAL CIRCUITS

Michel Dumont, *Echo and Narcissus Longing* (2021). Mirrors and mylar. Photo: Dave Zahondnik.

VALIDATION + VISIBILITY IN DIGITAL CIRCUITS

I feel isolated. We understand each other culturally but I'm also not what they want me to be. So, I can't fully do what I want at home. I do this because I want to share a message. Not because I need money. I literally do everything I chose to do…because I want to share a message…I believe there are a lot of creative people up north…but I think they need recognition. Because nobody talks about them. There's not even a celebrity up there. Nobody to look up to. I'm trying to change that. Recognition is what we need. We never had anybody on TV. We never had anyone sing. Never had any native person perform. Always a dirty place and dirty brown people and a clean white TV so it felt like we were isolated. We were. We were literally in the closet of Canada. I need to drag us out. I need to show everybody. But I'm not going to get recognition. We're creative enough to do everything.

There's already lots of organizations helping, but the battles we face the most are ourselves. That's why I started acting…I need to do this for the queer kids in rez. Literally that's what I'm doing. But I don't know I just need them to see me so they know it's okay.
—Jet, *drag performer and media artist, Sandy Lake/North Bay*

Jet Ego, *untitled self portrait* (2022). Instagram post.

I think working from Northern Ontario is a bit of a double-edged sword. People are interested in the stories you tell because they might perceive them as unique, but you might be viewed as lacking experience not being from the "big" city.
—Adrian Lysenko, *writer, Kaministiquia*

I don't have any pull with any of these organizations, but being able to stand behind them and say, "You know what, you should really have a look at this." It's not just about the story that they've presented, but it's how the story came into being that is extremely important, because it's not just supporting the actors that you see on the screen, it is supporting all of the people that have worked together.
—Lieann Koivukoski, *Post Production North, North Bay*

I don't see artists recognized here. —Anonymous

Media artist and drag performer Jet was invited to participate in the 2019 Cold Waters conference in North Bay; it was co-hosted by the Near North Mobile Media Lab (n2m2l) and the Media Arts Network of Ontario (MANO). It wasn't the first time they'd presented their drag performance, but the connection with other artists, and the visibility they experienced, was meaningful to them. They'd first encountered digital media through the n2m2l Digital Creator lab in Sioux Lookout while attending high school in the community.

I found this place called DCN which was for young people to go and make art, but when I went there's literally just little kids playing and older kids going to take advantage of the computers. But I was like, "Hey, we can make stuff." That's when I started making videos. And cinematography and film. I almost went into film and cinematography, but I like performance more.
—Jet

Like Alexander Rondeau (see his story here), Jet uses digital platforms, in particular Instagram (@jetpsychedelia), to connect with other queer folk, to perform their drag identity, and to increase their visibility. By extension, they hope their increased visibility will validate their work and that of others, particularly queer Indigenous youth. They put consistent effort into developing their drag persona and regularly posts images and portraits of themself in drag. Lisa G Nielsen and others have noted that their self-portraits are reminiscent of Cindy Sherman's work. Jordan is passionate about their art, intellectually curious, and engaging. They were already inspiring other, older artists while still a high school student.

> I see this incredible event [*A Tribe Called Red*] on my old high school track, the very same homophobic, racist high school I went to as a kid. And I see this young, trans, Nishnaabe clown MC'ing the event and I was blown away by [their] bravery…and for the town to celebrate with [them] without any negativity. It was a dazzling thing to see and to have so much support from the community. You know, as someone who's grown up queer, in Sioux Lookout, it was a breath of fresh air to be standing on the same field, where I had seen so much bullying as a young kid myself—to see that change happen in my lifetime. To think I had run on that very same field 25 years earlier…the *A Tribe Called Red* concert would have been the kind of transportive, seminal event which would have truly impacted me when I was 16. What would that have meant for me, how would it have changed my life if I could have seen such inspiring bravery? Thank you, Jet, for what that meant for our community. —Nadine Arpin, *Two-Spirit Michif filmmaker, Sioux Lookout*

Throughout this project, we heard about similar experiences and the influence they had on communities and artists in the region. Nadine, for example, discussed how influential it was for her, as a teen, to watch Shirley Cheechoo perform her one-woman play, *Path With No*

Moccasins, in her community of Sioux Lookout. Shirley continues to attract young people attending Weengushk Film Institute. Her drive to "create a reality for the dreamer" and to reclaim the voices suppressed by experiences at residential schools, ongoing racism, and lack of meaningful representation, deeply informs her work. The importance of narrative sovereignty, and the power of digital platforms to rewrite/ overwrite and claim space in film, television, and other spaces, is emphasized by many Indigenous artists throughout this project as critical to fostering a diverse and representative artistic community and to address racism and forms of exclusion.

These experiences underline the importance of, and need for, community-based and online artistic events presented through both analogue and digital methods, to open a range of spaces for northern artists (particularly marginalized artists) to perform, present, and show their work. In addition, these events function to encourage gatherings, share social and artistic identities, and cultivate networks; artists can connect, collaborate, and create work in safe, vibrant, and meaningful spaces. It is integral for artists to have visibility, to participate in extended interactions and networks, and to contribute to ongoing deliberations about what informs the use of these spaces and platforms, who occupies them and, as a result, shapes the collective imagination. The intersections of visibility, access to working and presentation space, participation in how these spaces evolve, and where these events and circulations happen, is rarely articulated in combination.

> We're creative enough to do everything. There's already lots of organizations helping, but the battles we face the most are ourselves. —Jet, *Sandy Lake/North Bay*

Northern artists have, over a long time, experienced an insidious inferiority complex, reinforced by perceptions that "real culture" happens in the not-North because "real talent" isn't found in the North. This has been bolstered by persistent racism, bias, and an imposed idea

of what constitutes "art" that is tied to ideas of the sources of "good" art. There is a history of southern-based groups coming north to address the "gap in culture," a subtly paternalistic ethos that dismisses local talent and also ignores opportunities for talent development through avenues of mentorship, training, and capacity building. Major funding agencies have supported a southern bias by funding outreach and touring programs into the North. In very recent years, funding agencies and southern-based groups have become more aware of these practices and attitudes (for instance, programs such as the Northern Arts Program at the Ontario Arts Council (OAC), for example, requires that 50% of participants are residents of the region), and northern-based artists have become stronger at advocacy, especially in relation to power dynamics, racism, and inequities in capacity. Yet, there is room for improvement, and there remain unresolved issues ....regarding control and direction, and capacity and meaning making, albeit in more nuanced ways.
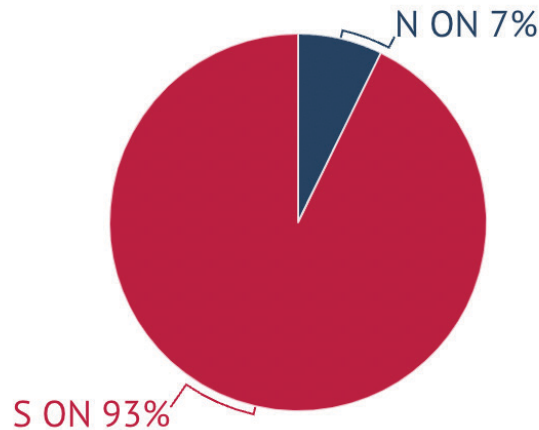
4.1 Total Number of Individual Grant Recipients Funded by OAC and CCA (Fiscal Years 2017-2018 to 2019 to 2020).
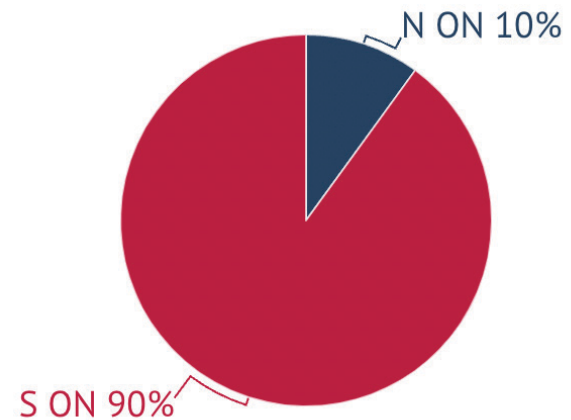
4.2 Total Number of Grant Recipients by Organization Funded by OAC and CCA (Fiscal Years 2017-2018 to 2019-2020)

There are significant costs associated with south to north tours, including artists' travel, accommodation, and per diems. A redirection by funding agencies toward targeted, strategic programs that grow capacity in the North could have a long-term impact. For example, a small tour from a southern-based group might require $25,000 in travel costs and result in four or five presentations in several communities, but $25,000 represents a small northern organization's entire programming budget for a year. That funding might foster greater opportunities, with long term effects in terms of mentorship, exposure, and encouragement, for northern artists and communities. While artistic exchange between regions is beneficial, when there is limited funding, programs might prioritize investment in the North.

Although funding agencies are adapting their jury processes and making an effort to address the needs of "priority" groups and marginalized artists, these are adaptations to established structures and processes. There are systemic inequities that reflect dominant practices and that privilege urban centres and major organizations. Some artists and circles are calling for northern representatives to support application processes,

and northern juries, particularly for more remote locations and for Indigenous communities, as there is so much diversity between areas of Northern Ontario itself. [1]

> When you start realizing the complexity…even the levels of literacy can be a problem…I know that there's the option to do an oral presentation, but it's challenging. It's not like you just flick on "record." It's not that simple. I don't pretend that we can figure it out now. But I feel at least these conversations are making strides towards trying to understand and acknowledging that there is a problem, and that it's not us. We're not the problem. It's not that there's just no talent here, or there's no interest. It's just that there's been a disconnect for so long. People here kinda believe that the city is better or the city is more sophisticated. You know, there's a certain amount of shame for some people, like, I've never been to the city. I don't understand the "art world," it's like people in rural NWO think they're not good enough, they're not fancy enough. I get it's not across the board, but I'm just saying that I think there is an underlying self-doubt that really whittles away at the confidence of most people. And that's the kind of thing that we're sort of trying to validate through our collective work. —Nadine Arpin

Rémi Alie (for more about Art Fix of Nipissing see here and here) spoke about the "act of translation" that is required when working with partners from Southern Ontario who may not understand the subtleties and complexities of the region. They may make assumptions about how things work, such as local needs and processes, or infrastructure, such as internet connectivity, that can affect how a program can run. He notes that his kind of translation also occurs in grant applications:

> One of the really fundamental challenges I've encountered, and we've encountered is, you know, places of incompatibility between the ways in which grant money is dispersed, and the lived reality and the needs of our organization and of our community. As a northern arts organization, run by and for artists with lived experience of mental health and substance use, there's a certain act of translation that happens when there's a conversation between us and partners in Toronto, for instance, who are used to things like functional internet, and granting bodies that can look at their program design, and recognize and cognize it as something that works with their reporting structures, for instance. —Rémi Alie, *Art Fix of Nipissing*

Many provincial organizations want to establish connections in the region to support programming, conduct research and other activities, or apply for funding, but their efforts to establish relations with communities and artists, or develop contacts, tend to lack long term commitment. Expertise offered by northern contacts are often dismissed. For example, in one case, an arts consultant noted that a staff member from a provincial organization had done some preliminary work and felt that they knew the region. The consultant, knowing the regional textures and complexities, recommended that the organization should focus on a smaller area of the region, recognizing that there was potential for more meaningful work on a smaller scale. The organization ignored the art consultant's recommendations. Instead, the provincial organization used a local organization for both the labour and a northern "credential," but maintained strict control over the project's direction. Various problems emerged over the course of the project and over the process as a whole: there was a lack of real representation in program design and participation, particularly from Indigenous communities and youth, and the data collection tools that were used proved uninviting and challenging for many participants. Finally, the report documentation, intended to establish that the provincial organization and its services appeared responsive to the needs in the

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1 For more about organizing and institutions of support, see here.

region, included a number of very cost-effective ways to support the recommendations (e.g., through webinars), however, they were not followed up on in a timely manner, if ever, which undermined the northern host's relationships.

> I felt the whole project was about coming up with a plan that justified their existence on a provincial level. I've seen this a number of times. Organizations that are driven by funding envelopes, or criteria based on expanding partnerships, or a desire to increase provincial visibility but do not have the staff, finances, and/or contextual expertise to undertake the work. I had serious concerns about it, and I told the Executive Director, "Don't even bother applying for a Northern Arts grant because it does not match." But she did and was unsuccessful.
> —Anonymous

In another example, Lieann Koivukoski spoke of her intimate knowledge of the film sector and the region, which is much sought after by film companies, particularly with the incentives provided by the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation (NOHFC):

> I get calls all the time, but I wish I could get paid for this [work]. People call me and ask, "Do you know…?" And of course, I know—I know somebody, or I know a place to look, but I also know a place *not* to look. [I also know if] this person may not be the right fit. But I can also tell you, if somebody is the right fit. —Lieann Kiovukoski

Host organizations are often expected to provide support and resources for southern-based organizations working in northern communities. These supports can include access to free, or inadequately recompensed labour for organizing locally, use of a variety of local spaces, and connections to members and organizations in the community. While a northern jury is often able to interpret whether or not project proposals include strong northern relationships, unsuccessful applicants—such as the one in this example—reapply to other funders (provincial and/or federal) and can find success there. A jury may not always understand the nuances of the region's textures and dynamics.

Organizational partnerships are generally short term, and designed to address a common issue or meet a need by sharing resources such as expertise, understanding, relationships, networks, and/or finances. Healthy organizational partnerships are mutually beneficial and aim to advance the well-being of those they intend to engage or support. Strong organizational partnerships are based on equality, trust, collaboration, and/or co-creation; they recognize that each partner brings its own knowledge and context. By working together on new ideas, understanding and engagement strategies may emerge that increase meaningful participation and greater individual, organizational, and community benefit and resilience. Developing a shared plan and implementation process is particularly important when working between regions to ensure respectful and culturally appropriate approaches, as well as to prioritize that important stakeholders are considered and consulted.

While some communities benefit from dance, music, and other performances offered by these organizations and their programs, the direction is southern-centric and doesn't concretely address the disparities between the South and the North regarding visibility and validation. This affects how communities build strong media arts capacity, and in turn, galvanize the creation of new work to share within (and outside) the region. Northern organizations signing on as local hosts, partners, or collaborators need to be clear with southern partners and funding agencies regarding roles and expectations with respect to direction, capacity, control, and decision-making. This would assist with fostering stronger partnership relationships between regions.

This periphery-metropole dynamic is habitual, with historical connections to colonial processes that established peripheries in relation to a metropole centre. The colonies served the core, which was simultaneously the seat of power and the seat of "civilized culture." These core-periphery relations continue to play out at different scales: Toronto/Northern Ontario, urban Southern Ontario/isolated Northern Ontario, and urban/rural Northern Ontario. In each case, there is an outward gaze that seeks validation and recognition from the perceived core. It affects how artists seek opportunities and recognition; it also affects what is perceived as valuable to their practice. Filmmakers in the North, for example, might seek recognition from major film festivals in the South, such as the Toronto International Film Festival or Hot Docs. Visual artists vie for residency spots at the Banff Centre and representation in major galleries. It underscores how important it is for the creation and emergence of cultural spaces, programs, and events with room for marginalized and BIPOC artists; a movement forward would be to dismantle inequitable boundaries that make it difficult for diverse northern artists to gain access to these institutions and be recognized and validated.

An example of a southern, senior arts media organization that took time to establish relationships and commit to an organizational move to Northern Ontario can be found in New Adventures in Sound Art (NAISA), which made the move from Toronto to South River in 2017.

> We were at the Artscape Wychwood barns for six years. It was right at that cusp, when all of a sudden, all of the lease rates went sky high. The total rent somehow tripled in the course of however long we were there, seven or eight years. And so we were in the process of looking for a place. We couldn't find anything in our price range in Toronto. We were sharing, we were renting I guess, a desk from Charles Street Video. Darren and I had moved up here thinking we would either hand off the organization to another director or test the waters when

we were up here. So, at Warbler's Roost where we created our own business, we started to put on some of the NAISA events [studio tours, Culture Days events, and other activities], just to see what the response would be like. And our board was behind it, because there was no way that we were going to agree to any kind of move unless we really knew that we would have some audience, or some interest in what we're doing. So, we did that for, I think, two years. And the response was amazing. The public response and the number of people that came…both were encouraging. So, it made it feel like, oh, yeah, this is not a stretch. People were more informed about the arts than what we anticipated. And so it felt like it wasn't a foreign concept. What we did at that point, after two years, is we approached our board and asked for permission to start looking for a space up here. And it actually seemed to help provide a more stable picture in terms of presenting what we did as an organization to the peer assessment committees that provide whatever feedback is necessary for our funding. And it's actually helped to strengthen us a lot as an organization because our funding's become very stable. Because we moved. One grant officer said we created a new paradigm. We flipped it on its head. We moved away from the city instead of toward it.

> —Nadene Thériault-Copeland and Darren Copeland,
> *NAISA, South River*

NAISA's story outlines a number of important actions regarding working in, validating, and committing to, media arts in the North. As previously discussed, southern-based organizations have often found it beneficial to run programs in the North because the organization has gained prestige or a sense of uniqueness, or because, at different points, funding programs have financially supported organizations that want to develop programs in the region. Unfortunately, what has underpinned these south-to-north programs has been a sense of the South's role as a cultural provider for a culture-less North. This perspective has resulted

in uneven relationships, power dynamics, and expectations of northern support at the local or community levels. Common effects have been a lack of pride in northern media arts, talent, and emerging talent, the use of northern services by often under-capacity organizations without any or adequate remuneration, and a focus on a multitude of fly-by, parachuted activities without effort to first engage meaningfully with community members or organizations to develop good relationships. The circulation of arts and culture between regions, between north and south, is important, however, it must be a circuit, not a unidirectional trajectory from the South to the North (for more on circuits and regional media arts infrastructure see Ecosystems).

NAISA made the shift to Northern Ontario several years prior to the 2020–2022 pandemic-migration that saw urban residents move into northern communities, particularly into the southern parts of Northern Ontario, to take advantage of more affordable real estate prices, less dense populations, and greater access to outdoor spaces. Prior to moving, NAISA spent two years building relationships to determine if they could make a long-term commitment. They moved to Northern Ontario with operating funding in place, well-established and experienced staff, years of experience in the arts media sector, and an established international and Canadian audience. Two members of staff purchased a home in the area and established a bed and breakfast and artist residency; this helped support incoming artists and residents in a rural area where residencies, and the capacity and space to establish them, are rare.

As they became more involved with the northern media arts communities, NAISA found the community receptive to the work they were creating and fostering, an active cultural community, and sets of relationships that strengthened their practices—the North was not lacking in culture or art. Northerners sometimes don't see the work that's in each other's backyards because of long-standing practices (and geographical distances) that haven't made visible or validated the art in the region.

> Celebrate our artists. Validate what we are doing. I was talking about Ahmoo Angeconeb, a world-renowned artist and the time when he created this incredible installation which was meant as a gift. After a short time, people got tired of it, I guess, and the community decided to throw it out! And I'm like, you cannot throw it out! That's Ahmoo's artwork! —Nadine Arpin

> We also find that we get more people coming from farther away than from close by. And I don't think that's because they don't know about us, I think it's far more a Canadian thing. Like, we'll have someone flying in from New Brunswick to do a one-week residency here, when there could be somebody in North Bay coming every day and working on a project. They know about us, but they don't recognize the resource that we are, or how our resource can work for them. Yeah, I mean it's funny, we've had workshops in Toronto, where people from up here have travelled to Toronto to take them, and we have had workshops here and people coming from Toronto to go to the workshop. It's bizarre, very bizarre. —Nadene Thériault-Copeland

On the ground, live and in-person exhibitions, performances, and events are incredibly important. Artists need to see their work installed, particularly work that is site-specific, installation-based, or otherwise spatially and contextually important. It is important to experience the audience's response and gather with others in galleries, residencies, and other venues, as well as in digital spaces. Curation of contemporary work from all communities of artists working in the North—artists in the BIPOC and queer communities as well as emerging artists—is vital. Venues, institutions, and organizations that champion representation of all artists aid in showcasing and enabling diverse work that broadens perceptions and conversations about art, between local communities

and the world. Visibility and validation are critical for northerners to see themselves in the art of the region, and neither happens consistently without funding and a healthy arts infrastructure or in the absence of an engaged audience that sees value in northern art practices and work.

The interchange between organizations of support, a healthy ecosystem, and the numbers of practicing artists is clear. We have seen throughout the research that where there are senior artists and organizations, a thriving and mutually reinforcing ecosystem develops. The chart below demonstrates the relatively low number of media arts organizations and artists that received grants in the region. It does need to be noted that media arts projects often take several years to produce, resulting in less frequent applications; and there are a number of organizations in the region that may not be identified as media arts organizations, or receive funding through the program, but do provide some media arts programming. For instance, the Galerie du Nouvel-Ontario (Sudbury), 180 Projects (Sault Ste. Marie), and the White Water Gallery (North Bay) support media-based and interdisciplinary installations and exhibitions.

Region/Year	Sum of Recommended Amount	Grants Awarded
N ON	$477,298.00	
Individual	**$120,622.00**	**6**
2017–18	$86,700.00	4
2018–19	$33,922.00	2
2019–20	$0	0
Organization	**$356,676.00**	
2017–18	$117,598.00	4
2018–19	$132,886.00	5
2019–20	$106,192.00	3
S ON	$6,746,531.00	
Individual	**$3,125,113.00**	**150**
2017–18	$1,250,969.00	55
2018–19	$1,007,528.00	47
2019–20	$866,616.00	48
Organization	**$3,621,418.00**	**152**
2017–18	$1,210,092.00	53
2018–19	$1,248,371.00	48
2019–20	$1,162,955.00	51
Grand Total	$7,223,829.00	320

4.3 OAC Grant Amounts and Recipient Numbers for Northern and Southern Ontario (Fiscal Years 2017-2018 to 2019-2020).

Nadine Arpin, one of this project's conversation facilitators, noted one of the key issues identified by some the arts media community: "Validation was the biggest barrier to people progressing and taking their work beyond maybe just self-exploration or personal expression."

> What I find as an artist is missing is a way for it to feel legitimate. —Zach Cassidy, *filmmaker, Timmins*

> One of the things that we were planning on doing [speaking about the pilot Indigenous Music Mentorship Program] was

getting funding to have a live performance in Sioux Lookout that would showcase those artists as well, to their own communities, which I thought was an interesting aspect that we hadn't considered. Yeah, celebrating them where they're at as well. And I think that if they have local support, then they're just way more likely to, to feel like they can keep going.

—Jen McKerral, *music agent and co-organizer of*
　Up Here Festival, Sudbury

The important work by contemporary curators and galleries like Between Pheasants Contemporary (Kerns Township), 180 Projects (Sault Ste. Marie), White Water Gallery (North Bay), Ojibwe Cultural Foundation (M'Chigeeng), Galerie du Nouvel-Ontario (Sudbury), New Adventures in Sound Art (NAISA; South River), and Definitely Superior (Thunder Bay) has helped to compel and encourage important conversations and critical thinking about art and exhibited contemporary work. Their focus on contemporary northern work includes supports for art by a new generation of artists, particularly Indigenous, queer, and disabled artists. Site-specific festivals like Ice Follies (curated by a collective of artist-run groups with representation from White Water Gallery, Aanmitaagzi, and the Near North Mobile Media Lab) and the early years of the Elemental Festival helped to shift local perceptions about what art is and where it could be exhibited. And they create venues for artists engaged in non-traditional and non-representational work. NAISA has deeply influenced the creation, reception, and presentation of contemporary sound art in the region. These festivals and galleries are increasingly considered valid spaces for out-of-region artists to exhibit and enable cross-pollination and access for northern artists and audiences to become known in the North and elsewhere. Contributing to this presence are factors such as the connections between local curators and other communities of curators, access to digital platforms (which expands dissemination and art circulation), and artists' exposure to and circulation within national and international residencies and art shows (including a number of

highly visible and influential artists who chose to continue living in the North). These developments strengthen the recognition of northern media arts practitioners and communities in northern, national, and global ways, and disrupt dominant perceptions about the validity and value of northern media arts. (For an example of local–global visibility via the digital, see the case study on Between Pheasants Contemporary.)

Digitally, there are many northern artists and Indigenous filmmakers extending their networks and audiences through podcast stations, film circuits, and arts communities outside of the mainstream and beyond Canada. This speaks to efforts to redefine the narrative of periphery and culture and also to circumvent dominant (Toronto, southern) circuits. There are complex dynamics to navigate when external places have defined northern relevance and "authentic" northern art. The fetishization of "the North" and "Indigenous" can lead to northern artists performing this exotic "other."

> The Europeans are the ones who decided what was worthy of being art. Ojibwe art gets overlooked because of where we are in the world, right? We're so far away from bigger cities that kind of control, you know, what is relevant.
> —Sarah Nelson, *Northwest Lead (Project Manager),*
> 　*CatalystsX, Thunder Bay*

We need to build storytelling practice.… Why do we stop telling our stories. We need to tell the smaller stories to get to the bigger stories. Getting used to the sound of our own voice. I could say the things nobody was asking me. Why don't we ask each other…we're missing the tradition of having tea with each other. Small talk is a gateway, you get to know someone. I'm inviting you into my mind, my world. This is an ability; I'm inviting you in behind my eyes. Then I trust you and then we can go deeper. —Tina Munroe, *Thunder Bay*

Repositioning the centre and the gaze is incredibly important for Northern Ontario artists as they redefine perceptions and utilize methods of disseminating their art digitally to new, global audiences. The processes of self-definition are complex and challenging. Self-definition emerges across all components of the media arts in Northern Ontario: it affects individual members of the arts community, groups within the arts community, considerations of culture and methods, and the processes and rigors of professional practices, such as submitting proposals for exhibitions or applying for grant applications. Artists, for example, may struggle with the application requirements set out by funding agencies. Visibility includes seeing oneself reflected in the application criteria, or in the types of applications and the artists who are typically funded, or by funders' addressing the challenges of application processes; visibility and validation also come from grant success. In the effort to reposition and self-define away from a colonizing, or dominant narrative, artists and organizations have to contend with funders, organizations, and a dominant circuit of visibility and legitimacy, that have been developed in the urban south, and are managed from the South.

> The structures have changed between the OAC and the Canada Council for the Arts so that now small northern organizations and festivals are competing with TIFF and Tafelmusik and other major friggin Canadian art institutions. Government funding of the TIFF budget probably represents a small amount of their overall budget, whereas for something like the Vox Popular Media Arts Festival, it's the whole dang thing. If one funding organization pulls out? Boom! There goes the festival. And that's the kind of stuff that I find maddening when I'm on a jury trying to fight for our region, when you're talking to people from Southern Ontario who seem to dominate OAC boards. You know, you'll get one person from Northwestern Ontario—crazy. They think that we're all the same. They think

Northwestern Ontario culture is the same as Southern Ontario. But no, not at all: polar opposite in my opinion. —Nadine Arpin

Nadine Arpin, a Two-Spirit Michif filmmaker from Sioux Lookout, was a conversation facilitator for this project. She left Sioux Lookout in her twenties to study at the Ontario College of Art (now the Ontario College of Art & Design University) in Toronto. While there, she observed the dynamics of the urban south; she is interested in how we can switch those dynamics toward a more equitable process and, ultimately, greater exposure, for members and organizations of the media arts community in Northern Ontario (for a more detailed view of a collective she and others have formed in Sioux Lookout see here). Reflecting on one of her conversation circles, she noted the influence of spaces like Digital Creator on young and emerging artists but commented on the fact that the initial supports that emerging artists receive are short term. As artists embark on a career or develop an ongoing professional practice, there are few supports to bridge these initial exposures and platforms to the continued visibility that they need to be noticed in the Toronto-centric spaces of the Canadian art scene, and within Northern Ontario itself.

> How is one to be made to feel welcome? Valid? Maybe Jet has enough confidence to just blow in to the city and be like, "Hey, everybody, I'm a star." But I was not that person at his age. I would have walked in, I would have been terrified…and gone home. So, the art scene is geared for a very specific personality, and you have to be aggressive. I never liked the downtown Toronto art scene. It is one of the reasons why I left. It almost seems like a parody of itself, you know? Sometimes it was just all so over the top! And it seemed out of touch, self-consumed. I feel there is a disconnect between the reality of what people in the North are doing. So, I would love to start seeing a shift in this with creatives coming to us, not us coming to them? Bring

your stuff. These are little things, but a real thing.
—Nadine Arpin

Artistic communities are animated when they organize and curate their own events and conversations, which in turn energizes local arts ecosystems and contributes to the media arts clusters we've seen across the region. Curating from the North shifts the focus to the work of northern artists, curators, and organizers and how they do their work, and determines what work and artists are invited into communities, establishing the foundation for those relations.

> We referred a few times to stories. I think stories are what people need, and stories are the things that allow people to *understand*, rather than know, and that, unfortunately, is our responsibility as artists, to give them the stories. And the technology is there for us to use. Yeah, you need this for your art, you need to support local musicians. You need to explain to people why they have to do that. The fact is, if you don't support your local musicians, then there are no local musicians around and then your story is not being told. [Instead] you're being told the story of a guy from Alabama. But there's no story about a guy from Cobalt or a woman from Cobalt. You know, these are the things that we need to let people know about. And I think they'll naturally understand what the importance is. And they'll start to build up a symbiotic relationship between artists and the people that are consuming the arts. I think it's very important that we start to become storytellers. And not necessarily in the writing sense. [The] arts really are about storytelling, or about presenting possible stories.… And with digital means, I think it's very easy to have these stories. It doesn't really matter what the story is, it matters how it's told and what it's conveying. [Digital] allows for stories to be put out on a very permanent, and a very, very wide spectrum, where that was never really available before.

So, I think we really need to start going back to basics and rethinking the medium and seeing what we can do with it.
—John Shymko, *musician, Temagami*

As John Shymko notes, digital platforms make storytelling more widely accessible and can therefore facilitate telling northern stories by northern artists; the stories we are told, and who tells them, can come from within northern communities. The internet fosters a global audience who want new music, podcasts, and other forms of artistic expression; they're interested in the people who are willing to express themselves and entertain an audience from anywhere.

> The curation [of Borderline Radio] became very simple. As I collected it, I would categorize it as the de facto program director, and radio is still radio, even if it's the internet. And it works. It works. The curating, the thought process of that whole thing is, I had my parameters to it and my hopes that there was enough of an audience, and that, ultimately, the music would carry the day. The Sault would be my local tribe, but…and as I look at our list, now we have an audience in Lethbridge, Alberta. I don't know who it is, but I can almost guarantee it's a Sault seed. And I can imagine that they are telling their Albertan friends, "Wow, you gotta listen to some of this music here [from the Sault]." And that is the feedback I've been getting. Now, you know, when I look, we're broadcasting to, consistently… over 40 countries are logging in. The Sault travels very well. And they plug in. I get calls from Argentina, Finland, England, Toronto, Mississippi, Georgia. And these are people from the Sault, and they tell their friends. People are also a little frustrated with the way Sirius works, the way their local radio works, the repetition of the whole thing. A big hole that was being missed by both the mass media and the local level, the local TV, is arts, culture, entertainment. Everything is so centred around the news, weather, and sports. And there's an audience

there that wants new music, and they could care less if they've never heard it before. They instantly can tell if they like it or not. That's happening more and more with audiences with the expansion of the internet. So, the podcasters we're really looking for ultimately, same as the local TV, we are all looking for people that are willing to express themselves. And then to do it in such a way that is entertaining. That's who I look for. That's what I look for now. And we're always looking for somebody that, first, has a story to tell. You can always figure out how to tell the story. Yeah, you need to find that story first. And there's so many of those local stories here that I knew I could find them.
—Adrian Vilaca, *Borderline Radio, Sault Ste. Marie*

The curated elements of Borderline Radio accomplishes much of what John Shymko alluded to: Borderline supports and builds the profile of local musicians through a digital platform, but curates the work through what Adrian Vilaca calls the "hyper-local"—local musicians and artists, local podcasters, and local audiences with worldwide connections. Simultaneously, the station becomes a magnet to draw audiences from within the massive scope of the internet where musicians and artists might not otherwise attract the same profile. These approaches to building visibility and validity take advantage of the digital network without losing the intrinsic values of the artists and their craft or the quality of the material that they perform. While Borderline initially intended to reach only local audiences, it is now reaching international audiences, through the local and via the digital. This approach reflects the experience of Between Pheasants Contemporary (BPC), with similarly positive outcomes. (For more on Borderline and BPC, see here and here). Borderline and BPC are defining the stories, the music, and the meaning from within their own communities. By managing and organizing the curatorial process, including presenting local artists, and by disseminating work from locally recognized spaces, they are shifting attention to the North. Southern norms are bypassed for greater focus on artists in the northern regions, on the media arts

in its centres, and on its rural or isolated communities. These curations provide avenues for northern artists to share their work. In the case of Borderline, the station counteracts the increased amount of "canned" content which has resulted with the loss of community television and radio stations.

Sarah Nelson, reflecting on a conversation she had with Indigenous artists in Thunder Bay, observed that these artists felt that visibility and relevance had a lot to do with shifting from presenting, or performing, for non-Indigenous audiences, and instead focusing on the meaningful stories and protocols from each community: "Knowing your history is so critical…and being perpetually empowered." Sarah notes the important and meaningful work that is being created and imagined for local communities, such as a theatre project that Thunder Bay artist ElizaBeth Hill wants to do, which would speak to the local history of colonization, and which might resonate more directly with the community. "I think that's kind of really lacking a lot of times. You learn about colonization, but you learn about it in this very broad, kind of abstract way. I think there needs to be more learning about the colonization that actually happened here," says Sarah, for whom the effects of storytelling, learning what is true, and experiencing art in a community context is so important. Following the discovery of graves at residential schools, there was a backlash in the community with claims that the local St. Joseph's Residential School had been an orphanage.

> I just have to only really speak for myself. I grew up not really knowing what happened. I was so in the dark, you know, about what happened, and so is everyone, really. And then once I understood what happened, I could have more compassion for my family. And then by extension for myself, right? Because your family is part of you. So yeah, I think that what they're saying is so critical. It's so important that we know our history, and we're able to be really strong ambassadors for that. But also

that everybody knows the true history too, because that will just keep repeating. Art is an amazing mechanism for that. Learning the textbook stuff and going to the lectures is one thing. But experiencing art, like paintings and plays and reading books, takes it to another level, you know. You really get a deeper understanding, I believe, through art. Yeah, art is such a powerful mechanism for telling our stories. —Sarah Nelson

The Timmins Film Festival just started and it's great. I would love to see it progress to the point where we get the communities from the James Bay coast to submit entries and to have all these small communities see that there's a way for their stories to be heard. And whether the stories are heard outside of Northern Ontario or not that's fine, that's for down the road, but for now it's just helping people to feel a part of this community. —Zach Cassidy

A high number of the region's most critically celebrated and successful contemporary artists are Indigenous: Carl Beam (deceased), Shirley Cheechoo, Tanya Lukin Linklater, Darlene Naponse, Michele Derosiers, Nadya Kwandibens, Anong Beam, and Nadine Arpin.[2] They are creating incredible and important work, and because of their connections to their communities, they maintain close relations with the North, rather than relocating to southern urban centres.

Nadya Kwandibens's art has been garnering a lot of critical attention, particularly her large-scale photographic works that are installed in urban spaces around the Greater Toronto Area. While she's been recognized by the Toronto art scene, she didn't gain that recognition by seeking it directly from the city's venues:

I lived there [Arizona] for about a year and a half. And then I moved back home. But really, Arizona, the Tempe area, a township outside of Arizona, or Phoenix, Arizona is where I really got my start. And from there it just kept building and growing, and creativity abounded. Really, I am a photo-based artist, very much documentary type work. But there are so many different ways that it can go, and I'm feeling rooted in my work now, given how many years I've been doing it. I feel like it's gonna be really expanding from here, which I find is really, you know, nurturing and very creative. Obviously, I've always been a creative person, I'm never afraid to explore different facets of my creativity. It's about listening to what stories need to be told and to be sort of a conduit for that, allowing the space for people to feel comfortable to share their stories. In me, myself, even the whole practice teaching myself more, more of what I need to know about myself in terms of decolonization, in terms of you know, all these things, what it means to be Anishinabekwe, you know, all these things are so intimately intermingled for me. So yeah, Arizona is really where I really sort of fully took it on and, no fear, just go out, do it.
—Nadya Kwandibens, *artist, Animakee Wa Zhing #37 First Nation*

Where Nadya has been showing widely across Canada, other artists are seeking avenues to exhibit in the North. Nadine Arpin questions how local artists can gain exposure and audience from within the region without changes to funding, venues, curation, and attracting talent:

Where are you going to exhibit? Who's supporting these artists? Once you produce this work, where do we show it? Southern Ontario? There's some support in Thunder Bay, but other than the Thunder Bay Art Gallery, Definitely Superior, and the one film festival, there aren't places to show work here.
—Nadine Arpin

2 Others, such as Rebecca Belmore, now live in communities outside of Northern Ontario.

Northern audiences can have a significant impact, though they are often not being fully engaging. Part of the reason is that funding structures and expectations are developed from Southern realities. In film, for example, small productions and independent filmmakers struggle with production grant requirements for numbers of screenings, audience numbers, and income generated through these screenings. They also struggle to gain access to the festival circuit in Canada and are subsequently left ineligible for funding from Telefilm Canada and Ontario Creates, which in turn puts them out of the running for matched funding through Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation (NOHFC) grants. The funding streams that are available advantage the parts of Canada with larger, denser, populations and a greater distribution of venues. (For more detail about the Film sector see here and here).

Filmmakers always talk about the challenge of Canadian films finding audiences, but an element that is often overlooked is the North's regional and micro audiences. The goal to achieve national recognition and audiences can translate into missed opportunities to recognize, connect, and cultivate and disseminate work to the individuals and communities in the North who could comprise a significant audience. A film doesn't have to be running in theaters coast to coast if it's running in theaters across Northern Ontario. In addition to festivals, there is a need to advocate for Cineplex and other franchises, along with the independent cinemas, to be more open to screening regional and domestic productions.

> It doesn't need to have a huge premiere in Toronto and Vancouver. But it can do really well in a box office over a few weeks across the Sault and Sudbury and Thunder Bay. [There is a] lack of regional planning in the way we disseminate our work. I've always tried on every show that I've worked on—if I work in a position as a production manager—when the show is released to definitely push for it to get into local festivals.

So that'd be like a North Bay Film Festival, for example, or into Cinéfest Sudbury. And we've been pretty good at trying to do that. But the other thing I've done too, and this actually happened, not to me personally, but for this particular show, which they hosted at the Mattawa theater, a viewing of *The Witch* so that everybody in the community could get the chance to see it, because it may not travel around as films would, you know, at the time, and we probably wouldn't be able to get it on television. And even finding a lot of these shows online can be very difficult as well. So, I always think that this is very important. And when I talk with producers that shoot in a particular community, I bring this up, and I try and encourage them to, you know, however we can present it. If it's North Bay, and it's a North Bay film, I usually can talk somebody on the board into letting us bring this film in and celebrate that way. Maybe you'd be like, well, that's just a stupid horror film. Okay, you might be right. But there might be a collection of people that would really want to embrace this. We did *She Never Died*. I got it in the film festival. It was a late night showing, which was great, because then all of the people that got to participate in that film got to see it, you know. It's hard otherwise. You need to make it celebratory for everybody. Not just, "Yay, I finished my film." So, I hope to see that with Darlene [Naponse]'s film [*Stellar*], and I have a good feeling that that will happen within her community, and I know for sure if we can, North Bay Film would definitely be supporting her, and Cinéfest [Sudbury] better, in my opinion. –Lieann Koivukoski

Northern audiences love to see themselves in films. They'll come out to see familiar streets or look for a particular landscape—and they are hungry to hear their own stories. Some festivals are profiling northern films (learn about two Sault Ste. Marie film festivals here). The eagerness to see ourselves invites us to consider how we might further profile independent filmmakers and use digital platforms to reach audiences

across a wider geography. As a result of the COVID pandemic, for example, the Weengushk International Film Festival (WIFF) pivoted to a digital festival. While local audience numbers remained relatively level, attendees "from away" rose dramatically as a result of the digital access: According to WIFF, the 2021 digital festival attracted 30% Northern Ontario attendees, while 17% were international viewers (US, Australia, Tokyo, Germany, Czech Republic, and Norway) and 53% were from the Greater Toronto Area. There is a hunger for programming curated from the North; work doesn't need to be screened in the urban core to reach international audiences. The interest in northern work and festivals is evidence of an untapped, and interested, northern and international audience.

Just as Northerners seek validation from big cultural groups in the South, artists from Toronto seek validation from New York, Berlin, and other perceived cultural centres. While it can be incredibly difficult to gain access to the Toronto International Film Festival or a large contemporary gallery in Toronto, some northern artists have gained visibility and further access by sidestepping the dominance of these southern spaces in their early careers. For instance, Tanya Lukin Linklater's (a member of the Native Villages of Afognak and Port Lions in the Kodiak archipelago in Alaska) work first became visible through venues in the United States; she then became known to Canadian curators through these US-based exhibitions. Digital dissemination of her online artist talks and video works help to circulate and build her visibility. The impact of Lukin Linklater's work, and the influence of her thinking, have affected the region by intensifying media arts conversations and increasing the calibre of northern work.

Alexander Rondeau of Between Pheasants Contemporary (BPC) is another example of a northern artist who has successfully propelled his career and the presence of BPC using digital methods; he has deftly engaged an international audience of curators, gallerists, artists, and followers through his Instagram profile (for a more detailed

narrative of BPC, see here). Andrea Pinheiro, too, uses her art and art practice to establish a strong connection between Sault Ste. Marie and Iceland, largely through her attendance at a residency and exhibition in Reykjavik. The relationships and connections she made continue virtually; they have informed and influenced her own artistry, the work of students she instructs at Algoma University, and the kind of work she curates at 180 Projects.

The COVID pandemic affected audience and access across the region; artists and organizations were forced to find other ways of enabling access and compelling new audiences. However, for some the pandemic was a spur to try other ways of promoting their art, while others had already started to seek audiences using digital forms. As a result, a number of artists and galleries in the North developed or accessed digital spaces for connecting to audiences more globally. Podcasts, live streaming, and Facebook and Instagram platforms were only some of the ways that artists and galleries launched shows, developed work and followings, and generally fostered access to their work. Musician Nick Sherman, for instance, released his new album along with a podcast. Artist and writer Sophie Edwards's exhibition, *your silence creates a world for my language*, at 180 Projects in Sault Ste. Marie, was amplified by a live talk that was recorded, picked up by CBC Radio-Canada Sudbury with an interview, which was, in turn, shared by Craft Ontario on their FaceBook page. The effect of linked online events, each picking up from the other, would not have occurred with a live, non-virtual, exhibit and talk.

An online presence increases exposure in terms of venues (physical and virtual) and audience. Michel Dumont, a Two-Spirit artist based in Thunder Bay, experienced a significant career boost because of the digital shift that came about during the pandemic.

> I think there's more onus on connecting outside of just the GTA. I was interviewed by the University of Guelph about

the joys of being an LGBT parent. Doing that meant using Zoom, which is how they opted to expand their pool of people outside of the GTA.

Stephen Jost [Director and CEO at the Art Gallery of Ontario] actually watched the whole process of building my mirror room on Facebook. He congratulated me and said it was wonderful to see the process. Because he was stuck at home, he was able to watch it. That immediacy that we have with social media, that what I can do in my little backyard in Thunder Bay can be viewed by influential art people, shocks me. Normally, I'd have to go through several layers of bureaucracy to speak with that man. The world has gotten smaller. There's some good things about this and that's one of them. —Michel Dumont, *Two-Spirit artist, Thunder Bay / Lake Helen First Nation*

Many galleries adopted digital approaches and virtual platforms during the pandemic. They continue to curate work in hybrid ways, translating physical works into digital forms, documenting work for virtual exhibitions, and increasingly, as Michel Dumont noted, using gallery and public space projections to share work and reach audiences. Most importantly for artists in the region, the pandemic gave the opportunity and incentive to reach artists outside of the usual circuits.

Stephen Jost, the director of the AGO [Art Gallery of Ontario], reached out to me one day. Because of the pandemic he was trying to check in with artists that he likes and follows on Facebook. I'm one of those artists. He wanted to check in and see what projects I've been working on. That's happened so much with other curators who were stuck at home too during the pandemic. There were all these queries…curators were looking for projects that can be done online. Lisa Deanne Smith [curator at OCADU's Onsite Gallery] put a call out on

Akimbo for virtual studio visits. On the online post, I joked that my dream was to show at the Leslie-Lohman gallery in New York—it's an internationally known queer gallery. In the messages on the post, I kind of jokingly said to the curator Stamatina Gregory, "If you want a studio visit, let me know." Gregory, like these other curators, was trying to find ways to meet artists from farther afield. [These big urban places] typically have a procession of artists, locally. There are thousands of queer artists in the New York area that they could choose from, but because of the pandemic they could look farther afield. Gregory was originally supposed to do a series of artist studio visits in Toronto. Because of the lockdown she couldn't do the studio visits, so she was looking for other studio visits. In the end, because of that post, it became the first virtual studio visit I'd done. She highlighted me on Instagram, and she nominated me for a Leslie-Lohman fellowship—which I'm doing right now—which I won, with eight other amazing queer artists from around the world. They only chose two Canadians. And they are all BIPOC which is wonderful to see. I nailed the interview. Now I can die. I've made it.
—Michel Dumont

Michel's experience demonstrates the importance of these virtual/social media networks as a means to establish, or maintain, a presence within a larger curatorial sphere. It is equally important to note that these connections aren't random. Michel, like other artists we've interviewed, have been very care-full and intentional about the connections they make, who they follow and reach out to, as well as the kinds of images they share in their digital spaces. Like Alexander Rondeau, the curator of Between Pheasants Contemporary, Michel has made significant connections via the digital, while maintaining a strong relationship to his very local/contextual practice.

I'm stuck in the boreal forest, in a lumber town that can be very homophobic. A lot of artists don't see past the forest. The boreal goes from the Ontario border to northeastern Ontario. It's hard for a lot of local people to look beyond our own city's [Thunder Bay] boundaries. The internet thankfully exists and if you know how to use it and you know how to be charming [you can use it for the benefit of your career]. A side comment on an Instagram account got me a residency in a Manhattan gallery. New York was impressed that I showed virtually in Helsinki and Colorado during the pandemic. I know I'm an outlier, but my career needed that [profile] before the pandemic. The pandemic and the virtual have accelerated it. The wine and cheese circuit in Toronto—I was never part of. I'm insulated from the drama. I live on ODSP. If I'd been a struggling artist in Toronto, I probably wouldn't be making art, but because I live in a remote part of the province, it's cheaper for me and I have access to a community and to art supplies, like the old plate glass mirrors. One of the projects I did during lockdown was a mirror installation. Somehow who saw this work said, "You don't live in Toronto." I asked, "How do you know?" She said, "Because you wouldn't have had the space to build a full mirror installation if you lived in a small apartment in Toronto." —Michel Dumont

Michel Dumont has garnered a significant international profile. New York saw Michel in a different light because he'd exhibited virtually in Colorado and Helsinki; the connection was made via social media, but he established his own centre and presence without having to cater to the dominant circuits and travel to the Toronto "wine and cheese" events. As noted elsewhere, by circumventing these typical pathways, artists can find the kind of validation and credibility that gives them visibility in the centres.

The fact that galleries went online during the pandemic, meant we could create a work and it would show up in a gallery—in their online exhibitions and in physical shows that let in limited numbers of people. I did a piece that was shown in Paris. The physical gallery in Helsinki and Colorado as well…they had a huge wall of printed digital photographs, and included mine. I did a video in my garage and that was projected along with other images of my work on walls in Toronto. It's fascinating that public art went to projection. I got all this international exposure from the comfort of my own home, through the digital. —Michel Dumont

The positive outcomes, in terms of building audience and developing connections and relations, as evidenced by the impact of Borderline Radio, the reach of BPC and NAISA, and the pilot digital VUCAVU film screening undertaken by the Sioux Lookout–based Minwaajimo Collective ([learn more here](#)), are testaments to the relevance of curated digital spaces and the impacts of collectivity. Rachel Garrick and Nadine Arpin of the Minwaajimo Collective are keen to build opportunities for artists to learn and train from the north. As individual emerging artists from Sioux Lookout, gaining exposure and enduring over the long term can be difficult. Collaborations and curated events, such as film screenings, hosting virtual exhibits, and enabling critical writing and artist talks, enable artists and northern curators to control the narrative. Self-definition and the articulation of art practice establishes a presence and a northern-based media arts focus that other regions in Canada, and elsewhere, will acknowledge for its strengths and potential.

There is a huge impact across the media arts in the North when artists, with a range of experience, collaborate toward a collective profile and are able to digitally reach audiences through curated screenings and submissions to international art fairs and exhibitions. International residencies are options that are increasingly accessible financially,

given the development of virtual residencies. International exposure builds connections and artist/gallery profiles, increasing the visibility of northern artists to Canadian galleries and curators in the South and elsewhere. The geography of Canada is often flattened: a curator in Germany may not make a distinction between Thunder Bay and Toronto, Sioux Lookout and Sudbury: a Canadian artist is a Canadian artist. Given that Toronto, for instance, looks to international centres for validation, finding ways to build international connections will ease entry into dominant Canadian spaces. Access to cultural spaces in the South has been an obstacle that northern artists have encountered for decades, but digital spaces open opportunities to other venues and regions that have traditionally been discounted as even possible because of geography, connections and resources; accessing these broader spaces through the digital help to cross these domestic north/south boundaries. We need to understand our location within the broader context and change our frame of reference.

As Alexander Rondeau's experience signals, virtual access changes the frame of reference for dissemination, but does not change where the art is created. Between Pheasants Contemporary (BPC) doesn't exist without its hyper-local space, but much of his validation is the result of his international connections and outreach. As Alex says, "knowing how to present the space to multiple audiences at once, is huge and has been a big part of its [BPC's] success so far." Similarly, poet Aseel Hashim finds benefits in reaching virtual audiences; the artist becomes more visible, although it is a learning process to discover where one's work fits in a global sense.

> On this particular page [Instagram], the people I follow and who follow me are strangers (not from my community), but I was able to create space for myself and gain an engaging audience by being unique and really knowing what differentiates me from other poets out there. I really believe that you have to know what kind of space your work holds for you

to take on that space. On Instagram, it is very easy for others to disseminate my work and others' work as well, and Instagram has the highest audience engagement than other platforms (website/blog, Facebook, and so on) in my experience.
—Aseel Hashim, *poet and dancer, Sault Ste. Marie*

Venues like the Toronto International Film Festival and the Art Gallery of Ontario will always be important, but for northern artists and organizations, the digital offers opportunities to attract and access global audiences and venues as well as champion the need for northern visibility. The digital addresses several issues simultaneously: the lack of contemporary and professional exhibition spaces, particularly in rural and far northern communities; the need to profile northern artists; the creation of a diversity of approaches to circumvent or creatively respond to core/periphery dynamics; gatekeeping and perceptions of cultural spaces in the South; and funding streams that are inherently biased toward southern, especially urban, realities.

What these conversations suggest:

Reorienting the gaze through the digital: Northern organizations, curators, and artists are finding ways to attract international audiences and shift the gaze from the South to the North, through creative, curated, and strategic use of digital spaces. These curated approaches circumvent typical and dominant routes to dissemination, presentation, and validation of work; they build profile through different networks. Strategic projects by northern groups and curators, supported by existing and targeted funding, can help build stronger visibility for the region; these could include virtual exhibitions, collaborative submissions to international exhibitions, fairs, and venues; critical writing about northern artists and exhibitions; and curated screenings on recognized digital platforms like VUCAVU.

Micro and regional audiences: The goal to achieve national recognition and audiences can translate into missed opportunities to recognize, connect, and cultivate and disseminate work to the individuals and communities in the North who could comprise a significant audience. Building circulation through local festivals, galleries, libraries, and other venues could bring visibility, higher audience numbers, and potential income to filmmakers and other artists. In addition to festival circuits, there is a need to advocate for Cineplex and other franchises, along with the independent cinemas, to be more open to screening regional and domestic productions.

Funding challenges for independent and small film productions: Small productions and independent filmmakers struggle with production grant requirements asking for screening numbers, audience numbers, and income generated through these screenings. They also struggle to gain access to the festival circuit in Canada and are subsequently ineligible for funding from Telefilm Canada and Ontario Creates. This, in turn, eliminates their eligibility for matched funding through Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation (NOHFC) grants. Funders need to examine these gaps and challenges and identify strategies to support independent filmmakers and create scaffolds to help filmmakers apply for funding opportunities.

North–South partnerships: Inequity and misunderstandings about the nuanced complexities of the region continue to affect collaborations and partnerships. While the Ontario Arts Council, and its Northern Arts Projects program, specifically, leans on the experience of northern jury members to discern the depth of relationships to northern communities outlined by southern-based organizations, many juries (particularly at the national level) may not have this level of awareness. Targeted jury membership, increased awareness, and close assessment would be helpful. In addition, organizations, particularly small groups and ad hoc collectives that are already under-capacity, need to recognize their own expertise and establish equitable relations with southern or out-of-region partners. Funding programs that support out-of-region companies tour or participate in collaborations and presentations in the North should require fair and equitable recompense to northern hosts and collaborators. They could consider preliminary funding that enables stronger relationships building and stronger processes.

5

**ALEXANDER RONDEAU—
BETWEEN PHEASANTS
CONTEMPORARY:**
NAVIGATING SCALES VIA
THE DIGITAL

Michel Gervais (Jenna Seppa), *Surviving with Jenna* (video still) (2020). Smartphone production and social media release. Directed and produced by Michel Gervais, edited by Andrew Scott, written by Michel Gervais and Anirudh Anah. Installation view at Between Pheasants Contemporary (Kerns).

ALEXANDER RONDEAU—BETWEEN PHEASANTS CONTEMPORARY:
NAVIGATING SCALES VIA THE DIGITAL

> It's funny to think about….When I think back specifically to the point where those folks, those two curators reached out to me, there had been no exhibitions, the first exhibition hadn't been announced. I think there were five Instagram posts, there were just a couple pictures of [Between] Pheasants, a picture of the space, being like, this is what Between Pheasants is, this is what we want to do, this is what's possible, feel free to hit me up if you want, that was kind of what had happened. There were already a couple exhibitions scheduled at that point that weren't publicly announced. And that's when I started realizing, "Oh, my God, this is a programming space."
>
> —Alexander Rondeau, *curator and founder, Between Pheasants Contemporary*

Between Pheasants Contemporary (BPC) exhibits contemporary art with an emphasis on work by queer artists. BPC's gallery is a small pheasant coop in the rural, francophone farming community of Kerns, Ontario. When considering BPC's genesis, curator and founder Alexander Rondeau reflected on the timing: "This project emerged because of COVID. It's so interesting to think, there was never 'before COVID' for Between Pheasants." BPC's launch was in response to the restrictions implemented during the pandemic; its start is counter to other, established physical galleries who had to adjust, and often struggle, with the COVID pandemic closures and restrictions. BPC started as both a physical and digital entity.

At the start of the COVID pandemic in 2020, Alex was enrolled in a Master's program at the Ontario College of Art and Design University (OCADU) in Toronto and finishing his degree from his parent's farm in Kerns. COVID restrictions meant he was unable to curate his graduate show in Toronto, so he began to consider and think critically about the curatorial practices he'd engaged with as a student at OCADU. Always interested in "alternative" spaces, Alex enlisted his parent's actively used pheasant coop as a space for showing contemporary work.

BPC is unique and rural; it is a hyperlocal, physical entity both "on the ground" and on the farm, but it became a gallery and programming space through digital curation. Alex has a sophisticated and lively Instagram presence. Through this platform, he has positioned the gallery and his curatorial practice within regional, national, and international circuits, highlighting BPC as both a physical and digital space. Alex's careful and deliberate use of context and language frames BPC:

> The success of BPC has a lot to do with the specific language that I use and the way that I present and contextualize the space. It's very clearly a contemporary or presentation space [not just a pheasant coop]. And it's not fine arts, it's not municipal. It's very specific language. It's very intentionally presented that way to those folks. —Alexander Rondeau

Alex's "folks" are artists, curators, artist-run centres, and contemporary art followers throughout Canada and around the globe. He carefully follows artists, contemporary curators, and galleries to develop curatorial relationships, to identify exhibiting artists, and to digitally focus the gallery's exhibitions. Alex's curatorial practice involves carefully selecting particular artists and mounting their work in a particular place. How Alex thinks about the art, how he articulates both the art and the space visually and textually within the digital, and how he makes curatorial decisions are closely related.

> In a matter of months, the space already has over 700 followers that are actively engaging with it, and I think it's really great to note that the audience is artists from around the world,

independent curators from around the world, critics, other artists, artist-run centres, ad hoc collectives. Commercial gallerists are following it and even some of the curators from Palais de Tokyo, which is, as you know, one of the leading contemporary art museums in Paris and it just has this incredible audience. And from the first two exhibitions, some great things have happened. The first two exhibitions are going to be featured articles in an arts publication…a critic reached out and wants to review the second exhibition and she let me know to look forward to a review of that show also coming out in the summer, [and] a commercial sale has transpired from one of the shows.

I always make a little mental note before I announce the artists or the curators of the shows: I go, and I click on their individual profiles, and look, Okay, how many followers do they have now? And then I look at the end of the show, and it always goes up significantly. So, it's also like bringing a lot of attention to the artists and curators in that capacity alone.

In terms of curatorial practice, so much of it is often DMing artists, they'll see their work and be like, "Oh, my God, you're so cool, I want to do a studio visit, let's chat." And so many relationships have started that way, just literally me sending them a message on Instagram, "I really love your work," and that's in and of itself important. And I've included in several past exhibitions, artworks that I've seen on Instagram. I just saw them and then put them in the saved folder, and I have this big folder of "artists to work with." And sometimes I just go look in it, Oh they would be perfect for this exhibition I'm working on, and so it's a great way to just line folks up for shows and stuff.
—Alexander Rondeau

Alex's own experiences—what he's studied, where he's exhibited, and how he curates—inform and facilitate his capacity to curate as he does; these are reciprocal relations. An urban curator or artist based in Southern Ontario might be able to cite multiple opportunities or mentor artists who have been available to them, but in Northern Ontario such opportunities and artists are very rare. Alex notes that, as a queer artist, having a connection to contemporary curators, the ability to access gallery spaces, and support by other queer artists, are all very important entry points. Alex's experience speaks to important and influential roles that organizations such as the Near North Mobile Media Lab (n2m2l) or a contemporary space like White Water in North Bay have within the media arts. They influence contemporary curatorial practices and foster emerging curators/artists; their roles are particularly critical given that there are no advanced fine art or curatorial studies programs available in the region.

Alex's position as a curator is inseparable from his queer identity. Growing up queer in rural Northern Ontario, with no internet, meant a great deal of isolation—until technological access improved and he was able to connect with queer communities online.

> Yeah, I think queerness outside of the realm of curatorial practice, or just in general has a very intimate relationship to the digital, and I think that's extra. So, in the North, I didn't know anyone queer in high school, and I didn't know any gay people. I was all alone, and that was horrible. And we lived on a farm, we didn't have Wi-Fi…. And I think, too, that finding community for queer rural and northern folks, the digital is huge in that. And to just feel you're not alone is in and of itself, huge and vastly important and can't be overstated. I think, too, in the capacity of the urban, those digital interfaces are still so heavily important….and so there's a huge turn towards the digital as well, even in the urban, to find community, to find relationships, and to meet folks, to build a sense of community

and these networks. Both in urban and the rural this is super important, but especially in the rural. —Alexander Rondeau

Digital access enabled Alex to connect with other queer folks, develop his curatorial presence (as a queer curator), and connect with potential exhibitors and other queer guest curators. Alex notes a strong regional narrative that queer northerners need to leave the region for safety and connection. He acknowledges that, depending on the context, this is true, but BPC offers a safe physical venue and digital space for queer folk and communities to present their work and gain visibility and connection. Alex is now very committed to an active curatorial practice in the North because it's the North:

> When we talk about these communities not having presentation spaces, or galleries, that is just even more so exacerbated for already marginalized and underrepresented folks who are even less likely to be able to show locally.... And so this critical, queer rusticity is this notion of the sort of geographical corporeal ideological aesthetic overlap with queerness as it finds itself in the rural and finds itself existing harmoniously and flourishing. Not in spite of the rural, simply because of the rural, and that queerness can, in fact, negotiate these cultural codes quite easily, if we're thoughtful about it. —Alexander Rondeau

Alex had moved to Toronto for curatorial studies because what he needed was not available in Northern Ontario. Yet Alex's move, and his later decision to open BPC and activate it as both a physical and digital space, is an example of how personal decisions, positioning, and limited resources force a response to the ad hoc state of Northern Ontario's media arts ecosystem. Alex's decisions speak to the challenges that are presented to individuals pursuing arts practices in the region. (For more on northern Ontario's media arts ecosystem of support, see here).

Alex has navigated several roles as a creative, academic, and curator: queer rurality, an urban contemporary, the spaces of higher education, a hyperlocal domain, and a digitally global venue. In the case of Alex's curatorial practice and BPC, the digital and the local don't exist without each other; these are linked spaces with multiple audiences:

> So, I think that definitely understanding how the space is situated, and how it is read and how it best can serve and be accountable also to the communities surrounding locally, the artists, curators, writers who are contributing, and to arts and non-arts audiences alike, anything, just understanding how to position itself to best serve and cater to all those different stakeholders is, I think, key. And that's something I'm trying to always be really self-reflexive about. But yeah, definitely just knowing how to present the space to multiple audiences at once is huge and has been a big part of its success so far. For sure. —Alexander Rondeau

Within curation, too, there is the importance of art knowledge and critique—and there is limited critical writing of northern arts practices, a lack of presence in national arts magazines, and difficulties in terms of exhibiting outside of the region. To combat some of this lack of visibility, Alex promotes other contemporary presentations and exhibitions through Instagram and hopes for reciprocity: not all local, traditional galleries promote BPC work. Galleries in other communities, however, have championed BPC, such as the Galerie du Nouvel-Ontario in Sudbury, and the Thunder Bay Art Gallery, which has expressed a strong interest in collaboration. 180 Projects in Sault Ste. Marie is also collaborating with Alex and BPC has, so far, presented the work of one 180 Projects member with another exhibiting spring 2022.

Visibility is an issue for Northern Ontario artists, and thoughtful, contemporary, critical curatorial practices, networked and made visible through online platforms, are necessary elements. Alex shared his desire

to shift local and regional perceptions about contemporary art, queer ruralities and how work is made and where it is presented. Increasing regional reception underlies his efforts to increase visibility and connection for queer artists in the North.

> Thinking of critical rusticity, queer rusticity. And pivoting back to the north, and the boundary public, like, yes, Between Pheasants Contemporary, or any of these pop up on properties, these ephemeral exhibitions will never overhaul the culture of these areas, but they can provide moments of slippages and plasticity, and sort of really create launch points towards wider social or structural change in these areas. And so I see these almost as little rhizomatic sparks that are coming up. This sort of leads maybe more to like the conversations I've been having with Andrea [Pinheiro, from 180 Projects], but we have to find ways to connect those little rhizomes that are appearing, and to have these sorts of ecologies of arts, arts and social practice— ecologies emerging in these connections and these networks, mutually informing each other.

> When I think of my experiences as a queer, rural curator I have a very specific understanding of what it means to build communities and relationships in those capacities, and how they're just as important as ones that are physically present as well. I think those sensibilities of lived experience also really greatly informed the capacity to do that. —Alexander Rondeau

Alex's digital methods, geographical and critical/intellectual mobility, and the development and scope of his art relationships locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally, gives BPC legitimacy and informs his curatorship. Local and international audiences are attracted to BPC as a result. It isn't simply that it's an "odd" or alternative space. Alex and BPC successfully navigate between audiences in different spheres—they influence the local through contemporary art

practices, and simultaneously position a hyperlocal space as a relevant, meaningful exhibition venue in what is often otherwise overlooked as a "backwater."

> I think having those connections and circles both up north, and here is huge. I think it is also huge for the space. You know, that's the thing about Instagram is that I know who to follow. And I know what to look for because I know through just my own connections, and I feel I have a pretty good sense of what folks are doing in the North, and the South, provincially, nationally, internationally. I'm always paying really close attention, always, really trying to keep in the loop of what's going on and to consciously follow those spaces with BPC, the Instagram account. And usually always, those will follow back. And I think, just having a grasp on what's happening elsewhere is huge. But I also think I personally even just like physically sort of embodying that intra-urban-rural. I think it is so important and impactful, it's because of my afforded mobility to go back and forth. —Alexander Rondeau

This context is important when we consider that in Northern Ontario -- which has a substantial landmass of 806,000km² -- there are only four artist-run galleries: 180 Projects in Sault Ste. Marie, Galerie du Nouvel-Ontario in Sudbury, White Water Gallery in North Bay, and Definitely Superior in Thunder Bay. These four small organizations play an important role in curating contemporary work in the region. The artists who exhibit with BPC see, like Alex does, an opportunity to shift local and regional perceptions about contemporary art and queer ruralities, as well as the means by which work is made and where it is presented.

Opportunities to focus on art and art practice are rare in the region, and it is notable that only a handful of organizations in the region support residencies.[1] These primarily artist-run centres are grounded in their local communities, but interlinked with larger communities of arts practices and artists through digital platforms that foster informal and formal networks, online promotion/reach, and online conferences, conversations, and other critical practices. It is interesting to note that of the organizations offering residencies, Bridge and Falls, in the township of Sioux Narrows–Nestor Falls, is the only one that does not actively curate media art.

Since our original interview with Alex, BPC has now supported two residencies: a remote artist residency with Hamilton-based artist Steacy Easton, who sent photographs for the hens to manipulate in their coop for a few weeks, the results of which were then mailed back to Steacy; and Marilyn Adlington a Toronto and Stratford-based curator who was able to come up to the farm for about a week (in addition to working remotely on her curatorial exhibition *from the ground up* for about a month). Marilyn helped with farm chores, such as cleaning the coop, feeding the chickens, pheasants, and horses, working in the garden, and cleaning the barn.

Where small artist-run centres struggle with capacity—180 Projects is run entirely by a small volunteer group and is dependent on its founder for access to space (learn more here) and White Water Gallery frequently has short closures due to capacity—BPC is addressing its sustainability in interesting ways: it uses non-traditional space (and thereby also circumvents and challenges the normative white box) and it attracts an active global audience. The space garners high visibility.

Being sustainable also relies on doubling the duty of an active farm space and the fact that it does not have high overhead in rental/space cost. While Alex has not generated funds to be able to pay artist fees or his own curatorial fees, he has successfully mitigated the risk of closure due to challenges of maintaining a regular gallery space with low participation. His innovative hybrid pheasant coop gallery and digital curation allows for flexibility and resilience that traditional curation, especially within a pandemic, might not provide.

> What's great about Between Pheasants is that it is super local and accessible to the local communities around it, and ultimately holds them at the centre and holds the local as the most important audience that I want to be the most accountable to. And then, from there, I think you're right that totally, the digital has a huge impact on being able to sustainably engage and provide programming to audiences that are beyond the local, but even so, in order to sustainably engage the local, I think there has to be a wider interest in some capacity, like a driving force, with folks from elsewhere that can best bolster programming. Having these sorts of exchanges is really important. And, similarly, being able to program artists from the North in urban spaces is also important and to have those inter-regional dialogues and partnerships, I think is super important to sustaining the North long term. In terms of individual practices, organizations, and spaces and collectives, I think they have to have something that can tether the programming space to wider audiences to best look to the long-term sustainability of an organization.

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1   These organizations include White Water Gallery in North Bay, Galerie du Nouvel-Ontario in Sudbury, the Northern Ontario Mobile Residency (run by the Near North Mobile Media Lab), Warbler's Roost (a private residency that supports the work of New Adventures in Sound Art, in South River), and Bridge and Falls Studio and Residency run by the Township of Sioux Narrows-Nestor Falls.

What this conversation suggests

- Alexander Rondeau, and therefore BPC, has the capacity to exhibit work that can navigate a range of co-articulating spheres—cross-geographical, digital, rural, urban, and queer—and influence contemporary practices in the region. His range of experiences contribute to his influence: working with the Near North Mobile Media Lab, opportunities to curate shows with them, formal training and critical practice, access to a wide audience (developed through these experiences), and an ability to translate these experiences to that audience. Galleries and other media arts organizations need to support emerging curators to explore their curatorial language, build their capacity in physical and digital ways, and expand their networks. This support is particularly important for contemporary, queer, and other marginalized curators and artists in the region.

- Independent curators and cultural workers in Northern Ontario need different forms of support to access research, international residencies, audience and market development, and touring funding at the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Council for the Arts. A starting point could be an initial series of projects that include mentorship by organizations who have established touring and market development activities.

- Through these funding programs, it is possible for curators working in remote regions to access international art fairs, market their events, be present at festivals and other spaces and also for festivals and other spaces to present Northern Ontario artists. This bypasses gatekeepers and the other obstacles to accessing institutions in southern Canada. BPC illustrates the interest in local and regionally specific art practices and their connection to networks of global artists.

- Organizations might explore opportunities for emerging curators and artists to work with, and participate in, residencies at artist-run centres in Northern Ontario. Similarly, this should be extended to residencies and galleries outside the region to help emerging contemporary curators develop relationships and potentially curate or co-curate shows. This could include inter-gallery exchanges of curators and exhibitions to build contemporary media arts practices in the region.

- Curators and galleries might explore establishing a range of hybrid and non-traditional spaces for exhibiting work and learn how to engage with digital platforms as a relevant method for establishing meaningful relationships with artists and curators at regional, provincial, national, and international scales.

- Galleries, curators, and media arts organizations might consider applying for funding to employ writers for professional reviews of contemporary work in the region. This would increase the profile of exhibited and emerging work, as well as develop or enhance critical conversations.

- There are no post-graduate programs in Northern Ontario (and considering that attending art school out of the region may not be possible or desirable), very little northern-focused critical work, and very little coverage of Northern Ontario artists in digital and print magazines. There is a need for non-traditional forums for engaging in critical/contemporary thinking, such as conferences and other symposia, critical writing in a range of print and online media, and conversations, exhibitions and presentations using digital platforms. Northern artist-run centres, collectives, and other organizations could act as conduits for these forms of dissemination and conversations.

- Local arts councils, municipal arts funders, and economic development agencies need to consider and expand eligibility for residencies, alternative exhibition spaces, and digitally established market development.

- Media arts organizations and funders need to explore ways to support emerging, ad hoc and alternative spaces and curators.

SIOUX LOOKOUT:
MINWAAJIMO,
TELL A GOOD STORY

Nadine Arpin, *Eve Zaremba's Dyke Detective* (film still) (Spring 2022 release).

SIOUX LOOKOUT:
MINWAAJIMO, TELL A GOOD STORY

We have to make sure we're supporting people who may be the best at storytelling...but if you don't have paper, pen, or audience, where are those stories going to continue? How can we support people so their voices are heard?
—Rachel Garrick, *filmmaker, writer, and performer,*
Hudson/Sioux Lookout

It's not enough to have just an arts facility, it needs to be a robust, full ecosystem of services including mental health support; this is the piece that is essential for sustainability. The media arts world, as it stands, is about business and schmoozing and "who likes me now." I want to challenge this approach to creating art and stop looking with a Western lens; bring things down to a more basic, kitchen table sort of approach. The challenge is to remove the dependency on the urban art competition and begin to build support structures here where we work.
—Nadine Arpin, *Two-Spirit Michif filmmaker, Sioux Lookout*

For some time, Nadine Arpin and Rachel Garrick have had a goal to establish a collective, and a space, for emerging and established filmmakers and other media artists in Sioux Lookout and areas surrounding it. Nadine is familiar with the artistic community, has directed and produced a number of films, and has been successful at large festivals and other Toronto artist events. She is motivated to reposition the gaze of the arts and funding sectors from Toronto and urban cores to the North, particularly in Sioux Lookout, where there are a number of Indigenous filmmakers and emerging talent.

Nadine hosted conversations for this research project, which led to exploring the possibilities in partnership with other local artists for virtual and physical networks and for a physical space for media arts in Sioux Lookout. The Minwaajimo Collective (in Anishinaabemowin meaning "s/he tells a good story") was formed in the fall of 2021. Its intent is to "address the needs of Indigenous media artists living and working in North and Northwestern Ontario; and to foster ongoing support for creation and exhibition."

The artists in Nadine's conversation circles reiterated the need to tell, and validate, Indigenous stories:

> My background is education. I'd tell kids, "Go and pursue your dreams." I love storytelling and to help people bring their stories out, and to use my voice too. I left education about eleven years ago and wrote a short film that eventually was produced with $100. I remember the first film I saw, it was in Toronto, *Star Wars*. It blew my mind. I want to do that. Tell a story. Adventure. Take on the Empire.

> I am a child of a residential school survivor.... [I want to share my] understanding of what story is for our people. [It's the] basis of who we are. Not just our language but also how we express things and the story of the land we live on. That first story brought us to workshops to get connected with other filmmakers in the North. It spurred me on to do other documentaries. The first was for TVO, *The high cost of electricity*. We live close to a hydro dam, so why so much to deliver electricity to our communities? I also did a doc about the first time I went hunting with my dad. Goose Call[1], that's the name of my company. To use my voice. The way to find a way to validate my own voice was to use journaling. I've cracked

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1   For more about Goose Call Productions, see this story:
    https://wawataynews.ca/home/first-time-film-project-leads-goose-call-productions

open a box of old journals and it's startling to see. We need to let people know, especially Indigenous women, that their voice is important. [That's the] biggest thing right now…[it] brought me to being a musher. I remember learning stories from both of my grandmothers…and from their grandmothers and how they spoke to them about our roles. I'm telling my story about how I came to be a musher. …I'm going to be teaching people how to go out on the land. Now I have 25 dogs. They teach you honesty. You can't lie to a dog. My big dream is to do what my great-grandfather used to do—deliver packages for Hudson Bay…. That's the story I want to tell.
—Phoebe Sutherland, *filmmaker and musher, Moose Factory*

Nadine headed to Toronto to attend the Ontario College of the Arts (now the Ontario College of Art and Design University). Her decision was based on the fact that there were limited, if any, opportunities for her to pursue formal arts education from her home community, and partly because her identity, as a Two-Spirit Michif, meant she didn't quite fit into her community.

As a young person coming from a small community, Nadine found the downtown urban art scene overwhelming; she encountered a world where substance abuse was tolerated and encouraged. Nadine began to find the "who-knows-who game" intolerable and exhausting. Disillusioned by the triviality of the Toronto scene, Nadine returned north and founded Full Circle Recordings, a film company through which she started to document and develop video tools for Indigenous NGOs. There were no mentors in Sioux Lookout to help her build her craft and learn the technical aspects of production and post-production; Nadine had to learn on her own, as well as navigate the industry. In 2011, Nadine returned to her art craft and, through initiatives such as the Bay Street Film Festivals' Doc's North, NSI and Hot Docs film labs, she has been able to further develop her work. She is currently completing a film funded through an Ontario Arts Council Media Creation Arts grant.

In 2020, Rachel Garrick pitched to Hot Doc's Citizen Minutes and was selected to produce a short film. Rachel had worked on a number of projects over the years with Nadine, and she asked Nadine to mentor her and be the offline sound and picture editor. It is vital to have a mentor who understands the stories and the place from which they are being told. Nadine's experience was important for Rachel to feel supported when working with urban, white, industry producers.

These collaborations between Nadine and Rachel reignited Nadine's long-time interest in developing and connecting with emerging local media artists. They began thinking about the film community in Sioux Lookout and the region and dreaming about what infrastructure could support and help build a stronger film ecosystem. They are both passionate about getting the equipment and skills into the hands of the many storytellers across the Northwest. The realities of access drive their efforts. It greatly informs how to control the process of making: controlling the narrative, defining what has meaning, and directing and controlling the distribution and dissemination of work in the local community and beyond. In essence, they want to direct what is visible, how and where it is visible, and most importantly, who sees the work (for an in-depth look at visibility, see here).

Nadine was interested to host circles with Elders, emerging and established filmmakers, and other media artists through this research project. The first circle—Winter—brought together Garnet Angeconeb and Tina Munroe. Garnet is an Anishinaabe author, retired broadcaster (CBC and Wawatay) from Lac Seul First Nation, a survivor of Pelican Residential School, and a Member of the Order of Canada who currently lives in Sioux Lookout where he continues his social justice work. Tina Munroe is a non-status Anishinaabekwe from Thunder Bay. She is a master's student at Lakehead University and a graduate research

fellow with the ReImagining Value Action Lab (RiVal). Her areas of research are on Anishinaabe perspectives of Land rematriation and resurgence, and the politics of identity recognition. Esther Diabo was their circle Elder. Esther is from Whitesand First Nation (Lake Nipigon Ojibwe) and is the current Elder at Kairos Community Youth Centre and the Northern Ontario School of Medicine.

As Nadine explains:

> [This circle] will focus on ideas about Anishinaabe-bimaadizi philosophy and traditional protocol in media arts creation. We will discuss the concept of decolonizing existing systems of access and support for Indigenous artists and their content. The stories and ideas you share within this circle will be added to a larger response. Other talking circles, being held across Northern Ontario, will collectively shape the project's goal of addressing the nuance of experiences and the specificity of needs for media artists living and working in First Nations and rural communities.

A central concern, or teaching, of that conversation was the importance of being care-full—thoughtful and intentional— about all aspects of telling, collecting, shaping, and sharing stories, including what it means to use digital and analogue forms of media arts production.

> Once again here we are with some threats at our doorstep and that's technology, and so I go back to what the Elders said: it's okay, we can't stop the technology from coming into our lives and so, what do we do to hang on to what we have? Enhance our stories, and our languages and recordings of our knowledge and traditional teachings and so on. And what the Elders said was use the tech that we have and use it wisely because it can be a threat and be used against us. In our own way, meet the challenges of our Elders so we don't erode our teachings, use

our modern-day tech to our benefit. How do we frame that? I use the word resilience—using whatever means we can. We can use modern-day tech to sustain and maintain what the creator has given us. How do we frame that? I'm sure other Indigenous societies around the world are facing the same challenges, the same threats. We need to think about the word *ayagosumsiuk* "be care full." That's what I would tell young people today.
> —Garnet Angeconeb

As that conversation is so central to the Indigenous approaches and ethos that inform all of the other conversations, and since it was difficult to harvest a single quote without losing the contexts and storytelling aspects integral to the conversation, we decided to share the full transcription here. We invite you to read it before, or alongside, other conversations within the report (find it).

Recurring motifs, relevant to the Winter Circle participants, emerged from the various conversations held across the region. First, the need for a holistic community media arts ecosystem is paramount; how this ecosystem works in each community, over time, will be different. The ecosystem will provide a range of supports, such as equipment and space (virtual/digital and analogue), mentorship, and training and it will establish conduits for sharing, disseminating, and distributing the work of Northern artists. These supports cannot be extracted from or understood outside of systemic and wide-ranging complexities of colonization, racism, homophobia, gender violences, and dis/ability. These complexities incite myriad health, addiction, and other challenges within communities and, in tandem, affect artists' capacity, aesthetics, needs, and approaches. Nadine and others are calling for northern artists to shift the gaze north, to turn validation on its geographical head both as a necessary action for prioritizing and validating the region and to decolonize dominant systems. To create a holistic ecosystem within communities, artists can highlight and focus on Northern stories and artists, and control approaches and artmaking by prioritizing Northern

narratives. The dominant system does not need to be the singular goal for Northern artists—what is made and developed in the North can be a driving force and priority.

Art Fix is a great example of an arts organization that both supports the development of artists and their careers and directly addresses and responds to the needs and paths of artists with lived experience of mental health and addiction (for more about Art Fix, see here and here). An arts ecology of "doings" needs a social ecology of care; Art Fix offers guidance and support for this recurring motif: how to work within and beyond the complexities that affect the region and its artists.

> You know how people [ask] you, "What would you do if you could do anything?" That is what I did. I started a takeout at the arena…then the pandemic hit and we came to an impasse. We needed to move forward so I've been exploring my journaling and my creative side. I'm working on a book. Through that I've done my journal and our experience as a family. So much has come in about storytelling and how to hear our stories. I'm a firm believer that through telling our stories about our personal journeys, we can change our communities, instead of feeling those feelings of oppression and being held back and the challenges of being held back. That's my journey in capturing my family's story in a digital way. Through that storytelling it's become fun and effortless. In terms of storytelling that's a big part of helping people in our community to overcome obstacles including trauma and intergenerational trauma.
> —Marie Norton, *emerging writer/filmmaker and takeout entrepreneur, Moose Factory*

The Minwaajimo Collective aims to support emerging and established artists, particularly artists who are the most marginalized in Northern Ontario, such as those who identify as queer or trans. The Collective wants to make their stories and lives visible; this visibility, in turn,

can enable the next generation to see themselves as storytellers and as participants in the stories that are told. The Collective, when determining what it might look like as an organization and developing its role—what it would "do"—was very conscious of the interrelations between art production, healing and care, and one's inner and outer work and a tied intra-relation with the individual artist and the community. The collective, rather than existing as an objective "thing" or a structure, is a living entity. This philosophy, which animates the idea of an organization into an entity that needs to be nurtured, ties in closely with artists who also need to be supported and nurtured—they are not just identified as participants or members. This philosophy, the "how" of the workings of the Minwaajimo Collective, is central.

In conversation with Sophie Edwards to talk through some of ideas shared by the circles, Nadine reflected:

> As Indigenous people we have to be willing to accept that our philosophy or ontology is a different way than Western culture has been presenting it. The way Indigenous people observe their lives or function, it is a much more holistic approach. It's not a linear approach, it's much more thinking about the mind, thinking about the heart, the spirit and the body. How I'm understanding what Tina [Munroe] is saying, is that the current systems, as they are operating today, are not acknowledging the distinctive nuances of an Indigenous culture, in the context of media production, story generation, or digital storytelling.

So often at conferences, the most engaging, meaningful, and important conversations and connections are made during the breaks and informal gatherings. In Nadine's conversation circles, the participants often spoke about the importance of the kitchen table and the conversations that happen there; the importance of meeting people in the community hall; and the relevance and resonance of the small story. The big gallery in the urban south or the premiere at a major film festival are sought

after for validity and visibility, but the importance of the small and informal circles is often overlooked. The big story, the big dramas, are often played out in quiet ways, through multiple, overlapping, ongoing conversations that build a narrative over time and have deep relevance. The intersection of sites of social interaction with situated experiences and meaning making happens in seemingly "small" ways; these so-called small ways can therefore privilege voices that are often lost in the big stories of the dominant process and culture, voices of, for example, women, mothers, Indigenous artists, marginalized youth, and disabled artists. These "minor" voices, stories, and lives become privileged over the "important" dominant, established voices of the urban core, of men, of privilege, of settlers, and other established artists, institutions, and systems.

[An important question is, How and why do we reveal the] small "s" stories? Respecting that it's the simple things that are the building blocks of something bigger. It's not necessarily just the grand events, not just the battles that happened, and the conflicts...and that kind of gets lost when you look at the history. Right now, I'm reading, supposedly, the definitive historical book on the Métis and the life of the evolution of the Métis nation, but there's not a whole lot about just life. What was it like in the homestead? What did the women do? What were the children doing? What did they eat? What were the recipes? Things, songs, any of that kind of stuff is not part of it. So now we have this opportunity...we have control and the first time to tell our own stories.

I felt Garnet [Angeconeb] was trying to say that we're striving to find this balance between respecting and honouring our historical oral approach to sharing knowledge, to learning teachings, to incorporating all this sort of value in these layered approaches to life. [The stories have] all these sorts of ways of

responding to life's problems and little lessons that you want to teach or pass on.

Are the little stories actually as impactful as we hope? I think they are. [People] are sharing their stories [on TikTok], just like sitting around the kitchen, here's this joke, or here's my recipe for how I make, whatever, like Sage tea. Or there was one like, how to purify with cedar. Some of it's ceremonial and some of it's medicine, some of it's just fun, crazy, silly, or whatever. I'm only understanding its [importance] more now. Because of my own family's losses, like losing photographs in house fires. There're no tangible objects to tie me to the past anymore, because it doesn't exist. And unfortunately, I'm looking through books and looking at other people and trying to see common experiences. And maybe that's what the little stories generate.... it makes it more relatable, maybe, it seems more human. I see it. I want to see it, particularly from a Michif perspective, because the Michif are even smaller. We're like the microcosms of the microcosm. I feel like we are the people of Whoville.
—Nadine Arpin

The challenge is how to change from negative to positive through art. I love Gord Downey and his music but sometimes I have a bit of a problem with...and not a problem with what he did, but others have wanted to tell the stories and they have no knowledge [of how to produce them], and that is a bit of…it's something I have great difficulty with as a survivor.
—Garnet Angeconeb, *Elder and retired broadcaster, Lac Seul First Nation*

Tourism. Picking and choosing stories they [settler Canada] can digest. Their road to reconciliation is to hear something, do something. I don't think reconciliation looks like this. You don't have to have access to someone's story to understand

that colonialism is back or know we're worthy of…. At the same time, it's important for us to tell the stories. We don't have to translate for anybody. My imagination was painted by my mother. I'm writing it to get it out of my body, so it flows through me and exists as an Indigenous perspective of today. Settler readers. It's impossible to suspend that white lens with our Indigenous lens. The white lens is always there because our bodies are political. What it means to be well enough in mind and spirit to be well enough to write in the first place, let alone to share it with the world.

We need to build storytelling practice. Why do we stop telling our stories? We need to tell the smaller stories to get to the bigger stories. Getting used to the sound of our own voice. I could say the things nobody was asking me. Why don't we ask each other? We're missing the tradition of having tea with each other. Small talk is a gateway, you get to know someone. I'm inviting you into my mind, my world. This is an ability; I'm inviting you in behind my eyes. Then I trust you, and then we can go deeper. —Tina Munroe, *Thunder Bay*

I go back to the word "be careful." One of the things that as a survivor and Anishinaabe people that has made us be more careful in terms of how we relate to the outside world is in many ways we did lose our ability to trust. In many ways I've lost my ability to trust, whether it's a police officer or a banker. When I look at the history of Northern Ontario especially north of Sioux Lookout…. In many ways I was always careful when going to interview a Nish person, that they were properly recognized and not just taken. And that's so important. When I talk about reconciliation, it's about doing business in a different way that is good for Nishnaabe people and good for non-Nishnaabe people. —Garnet Angeconeb

We invited people to come to the centre and pour out their stories. People need[ed] to know their stories would be planted somewhere safe. We forget the value of the everyday story. We look for something epic. Sometimes it's the day-to-day story, to bring the storyteller back to the smells, the experience. And to know we care about you, not just the stories. And we don't all tell stories the same way. These are nations the same way that Canada is a nation, very different ontologies, everyone is different. —Tina Munroe

After the circle, Nadine had further reflections about the importance of the small stories and the process of telling them. In a separate conversation with Sophie Edwards, Nadine noted that there is something radical and powerful about telling small stories. The increasing accessibility of media means the small stories can change narratives and the access to telling them in powerful and subtle ways, even if on the periphery of named power. It's a different sort of power and emerges from a different ontology; accessibility shifts the power dynamic—it changes narrative controls, such as who tells the story, what is shared, and the audience itself. Space is opened for people and elements that are erased from the dominant stories—women, Indigenous and queer bodies, or aspects of daily lives. Nadine reflected on the dynamics of reaching audiences, while considering Garnet's meta teaching about being care-full.

It's kind of a challenge…if you are interested in that audience, or those eyeballs, does that compromise what you're doing? How do you not get sucked up into that whirlpool of pumping out content? And how can you keep it meaningful? Something, for example, like a major Netflix crime series called *Yellowstone*. It still checks all those boxes, there's action, it's sexy, and it's very American; the white people are still in power, the white people are still the big saver. However, they are still pushing the

envelope a little bit, sure. The time is now for Indigenous people to push the envelope for ourselves.

So, to bring it back to the question of whether or not we need these little stories, I think we do, and I believe they are impactful. TikTok is the proof, the stories that happen in the kitchen when you are hanging around the table with your aunties and having tea. And oddly enough, the pandemic has in some ways levelled a proverbial playing field and added even more lonely people. It doesn't matter what time of day one scrolls. Through TikTok I've been in the homes of Muslim people. I've been in the homes of Asian people. I've been in the homes of African people. People all over the world are just hanging out like we are right now. And they're sharing their stuff, and sometimes are crying, and sometimes laughing, and sometimes they are angry, and it's just all so bizarre. So yeah, I do think these little stories make a difference. And I'm only beginning to truly understand what this means. I think because I am trying to understand something that isn't that far away. And because of my family's losses over...like losing photographs, and the moving and all these little personal objects, there's nothing to tie me. There's no tangible objects to tie me to the past anymore, because they don't exist. And unfortunately, I'm looking through books and looking through other people and trying to see common experiences. So, we're looking for common experiences. And maybe that's what the little stories generate, because I'm not going to battle every day. I'm not friggin' taking back the frog plains. And all that kind of stuff. So I guess it makes it more relatable, maybe, it seems more human.
—Nadine Arpin

Rachel and Nadine began collaborating with Equay-Wuk (Women's Group), an organization dedicated to addressing the needs of Indigenous women. Equay-Wuk's membership extends to Treaty 3

communities as well as Sioux Lookout. They are increasingly interested in developing digital workshops and virtual spaces for connection and training, partially because of the large geographic territory they support, and partially because of the effect of COVID and the necessity of adopting online methods and platforms in the absence of offering programs or meeting physically.

In my young life, I was with my parents and we became part of the Indian relocation program out of Lac Seul. Relocated 20 families to Elliot Lake. That was 1966. I was [...] years old. Then I went to Pelican Lake Residential School. Then high school in SSM [Sault Ste. Marie] and I started Fine Art at the Ontario College of Art, but I didn't finish and I didn't know what to do with my art, and [was] coming to get to know myself and what I'd come through. So art went on hold. I went to university. I wanted to learn more about history and the politics of this country and our people. Instead of getting emotionally involved in issues, I wanted to see a clearer picture. But I didn't finish that either. My alcoholism took over. Throughout the years I came back to Sioux Lookout because my father got sick. I got a job here and I've been working with Equay-Wuk…going into [my] 22nd year. We have a training program, community wellness program. I found my sobriety before getting money for my residential school—that was in 2008. So I've continued to work at Equay-Wuk. Through the course of the pandemic I've found my way back to my creativity. I made a dream catcher...I'm beading, and I also found my way back to painting...the first person that I painted was my great-grandmother…. I support the arts for us women. I'd like to find more women native artists in the area eventually. At work we've had to get into filmmaking…we've been making different kinds of films for women on creativity and other things, which led me to Rachel Garrick. —Darlene Angeconeb, *Executive Director, Equay-Wok, Sioux Lookout/Lac Seul First Nation*

It was important to explore what their collaboration with Equay-Wuk might look like. In the spring of 2021, Nadine and Rachel applied to the Indigenous Screen Office (ISO) for funding to introduce filmmaking in an online format to Indigenous women from small communities in the areas north of Sioux Lookout. Rachel and Nadine received their funding to facilitate virtual workshops, to lead the women through the processes that would enable them to share stories and write and create very short films.

Like Marie Norton (quoted earlier), many Indigenous people in the region are turning to the arts to aid in the processes of healing and to share their personal and community stories (see, for instance, here for a quote by Sarah Nelson). To do this, digital storytelling is often chosen as the medium. As noted elsewhere, video and film can replicate oral traditions in ways that other mediums cannot.

> I'm happy to be a part of this [conversation circle]. I think during this pandemic art is becoming one of the new ways of our world. I think it's not only about storytelling but it's a method that needs to start being used in every aspect of our communities, especially for women. I sit on the […]. We've been having these discussions at the regional level as well: how to reach women, how to get messages, like the Red Dress Campaign [out there]. [We are] trying to figure out how to deliver and raise more awareness. So visual arts is going to play a big part in that, and I think it should. In terms of creating new ways and methods to help facilitate that storytelling, for myself, I'm not much of a painter or an artist. I've sewn and beaded…I fall into that emerging category. I fall more into photography or wanting to capture things with camera or video.
> —Mona Gordon, *Lac Seul First Nation*

The ISO workshops informed and supported their thinking about training and support for emerging filmmakers and the importance of teaching, mentoring, and supporting each other. With each subsequent circle and activity, the group identified issues and potential strategies and approaches. The film workshop helped them see that they could create networks to support women where they are—geographically, culturally, and artistically.

> We can create a filmmaking context which has an Indigenous philosophical approach to it. We can think outside of the box, the formula is broken, it doesn't work. Everyone has their own ways, and maybe we need to be more open to that idea of nuanced approaches that are specific to each community or region. —Nadine Arpin

This point is particularly salient. It recognizes that there is no single model, particularly no dominant model, that will work for all artists in every community. College programs that require relocation are not suitable for many people, particularly artists with family responsibilities and ties to their communities. On-the-job training through large film productions are also unsuitable for the same reasons. Individuals may not feel on-the-job training are safe spaces; the majority of films in the region are produced by large, Southern film production companies and the strength of their Indigenous relationships and commitments are often unknown. In addition, the work they produce may or may not have meaning to Indigenous communities. The question remains: How to support the exploration of digital storytelling within culturally relevant contexts, and within Indigenous communities and networks?

In the circles, the artists discussed the challenges of supporting individuals in remote communities. Although COVID spurred a digital pivot, the gaps in internet infrastructure have meant that some communities were further isolated. Artists, mentors, and artist educators face the challenges of providing support to the communities. While the internet has meant some increased access (it worked for the women who were able to join the virtual workshop series, for example), most

artists want and need a combination of virtual/digital and analogue/in-person relationships, training, and engagement (see here for more about analogue and digital spaces). Similar observations were expressed in the other conversation circles. With respect to participants who live in remote communities, artists like Nadine and Rachel want a way to provide ongoing support and mentorship. They don't want to parachute in and leave again without offering on-going support.

> We can't physically get there [during this time]…[we've been] helpless for a year, [with] no ability to travel. No way I'm going to travel to a remote community…even the internet is limited because [we] can't count on the internet. [We need] ways to make sure isolated communities aren't forgotten. How to keep the creativity going.

> I'm also listening [to you, Jordan Fiddler]. You had to leave your community, experiment and find your way, and now [you're] excited to go back to your community…[to] try to be the person you wish you had, so that maybe there's these kids that benefit from that. [People see] something not seen before, but something they needed to see…. It's harder in a small community in so many ways.
> —Lisa G Nielsen, *filmmaker, Neilson BC*

Reflecting on those conversations, Nadine noted:

> I can only speak from my understanding, again, as someone who has not lived in a First Nations community, and I don't truly understand the complexities. I have visited them. My sensibility has been shocked by just some of the standards of living that people have to endure in an isolated northern community. So it's hard to say but I would think finding validation in a community which is profoundly depressed in general is critical. Overall, it is hard to celebrate one another when you all feel like

shit, to be frank. This is a sweeping generalization, of course. In every community there is something going on because people need to survive. People do survive. But I feel that surviving is a perpetual state of being. So it's hard to create when you're just trying to get through the day. And then you see these little shining stars who pop up in the community, despite the ongoing trauma. Pikangikum [First Nation] was a perfect example. When I went up to Pikangikum with Lisa…this is how I met her…we did a weeklong mentoring workshop, and there was one kid coming to the workshop who had spent the whole night in a burnt-out house drinking with his friends, because he can't go home, showing up eight o'clock in the morning to do his workshop in socks because he lost his shoes on the way to school, in the middle of October! He managed to make the most beautiful film. I couldn't do that. I could not do that day in; day out and still show up and have some sense of wonder. So the intense amount of resiliency required to live in some of these communities is enormous. I think when Jordan [Fiddler] is talking about validation, it stems from people not believing their experience is interesting or worthy of attention. This is another perfect example, and I always love to tell this story about Ahmoo Angeconeb, [who] is widely considered one of the very top Canadian Woodland native artists and is highly collected across Europe. Back in the early 2000s, I believe it was, he did this incredible 3D sculpture. It was made from simple shapes out of plywood, but it was an original piece of art that the artist built himself. Then, I'm driving down one of the town's main street back alleys and there it is! In the dumpster! What the hell! I guess the show was over and they were just like, "Whatever, the show's over." LOL, you know what I mean? And so this can sometimes be the mentality in small communities where art has a limited definition. Nobody knew him like this. He was just Ahmoo. And frankly, Ahmoo was okay with that. I think validation is a complex question. What does it mean to validate?

Patience, persistence, and a constant presence so people can trust it is not just going to disappear when the funding dries up.

One of the circles that Nadine facilitated explored the experiences of 2SLGBTQPA media creatives living and working from rural and isolated communities in the vast Northwestern territory. In this conversation Nadine, Jordan Fiddler, and Lisa G Nielsen discussed the key influences in their lives that steered them towards digital media creation as a viable means for personal expression; in discussion, they also explored what it has meant for queer filmmakers to live and produce work in their community and what they'd need to feel supported (more of that conversation can be

> I was very interested in speaking with young media creatives who were not only Indigenous and living in isolated and rural communities but were also Two-Spirit and transgendered. What did it mean for them do work which could potentially explore issues around sexual orientation in the context of a communities which have strong Christian values. Interestingly enough, I have found communities which have returned to traditional ways seem to have no apparent issues with sexual orientation. Once again, heavy colonial influences have continued to repress self-expression.

> So what was really exciting about that particular circle is I was able to bring a young trans person named Jordan Fiddler. I believe they are identifying as Jet currently. However, these things change, they are very fluid. They are, I believe, in their 20s, so very young. And I saw Jet for the first time when they were act[ing] MC for a live performance by *A Tribe Called Red*. For a town of 5,000 this was a big deal. And young Jet, maybe 16 at the time, was dressed like some kinda sassy Sally-Ann clown. Their outfit was a little offbeat, but it was amazing! Again, it was a dazzling thing to see so much support from

the community for Jet. You know, as someone who's grown up queer, in Sioux Lookout, it was a breath of fresh air to be standing on the same track and field where I had seen so much bullying as a student myself. The one thing that Jet did talk about, and I think this is probably the most important aspect of what came out of the conversation, was that he felt validation was the biggest barrier to people progressing and taking their work beyond their immediate community.

> I finally met Jet through the Digital Creator (DC) program at the Sioux Lookout Public Library in partnership with North Bay's N2M2L. At that point Jet had already developed a few short pieces. They had collected costumes and took self-portraits as various different trans-clown characters. So I said, "You seem to have access to equipment and tech support. What are your challenges?" And although Jet was probably one of the most productive and prolific of the attendees of that program in their time, the DC program still has its shortcomings. Despite their efforts of going to the schools to talk about DC and being available after hours, the participation was limited. The inability for young creatives to provide exhibition or distribution was where the disconnect happened. The result was a lack of incentive or even understanding that there was opportunity for people to do more with their work. Frankly the program was overwhelmed with just trying to provide a safe place for the "freaks and nerds." Some place that wasn't home for a little while. —Nadine Arpin

> I started when I found this place called Digital Creators North, which was for young people to go and make art, but when I went there's literally just little kids playing and older kids going to take advantage of the computers, but I was like "Hey we can make stuff." That's when I started making videos.

And cinematography and film. I almost went into film and cinematography, but I like performance more. —Jordan Fiddler

Nadine's own process as a filmmaker has informed her desire to help build a supportive film ecosystem for Indigenous artists and storytellers. This would include artists from smaller communities farther north who use Sioux Lookout as a hub for health care, education, and other services, and are, therefore, connected to it. The Minwaajimo Collective's dream would be to be provide a full range of online and physical opportunities: in-person gatherings in the communities, virtual/digital networks and deliveries, and onsite in Sioux Lookout. "Sioux Lookout, again, is services," says Nadine. "It is the hub, quite literally, for 32 communities. They all fly in through Sioux Lookout."

There are few opportunities for young media artists like Jet, or more experienced ones like Nadine, to screen their work, gain professional development experiences, and otherwise develop professional projects within their own communities. The Minwaajimo Collective intends to create a physical and virtual space that can advance the creation and dissemination of work from Sioux Lookout and area without having to depend on the visibility and education provided by urban centres like Toronto.

Professional screenings, exhibitions and performances are rare in many communities:

> It's sometimes so few and far between to see these beautiful performances, that they stick out more. To this day, Shirley Cheechoo performing "Walk in my Moccasins" totally blew my mind. You get to see this briefly, something you wouldn't have seen, so impactful…and I'm sure Shirley had no idea, just like Jordan [Fiddler] wouldn't have known how much they impacted me. —Nadine Arpin

These circles of influence are often quiet and difficult to track, but they are important not only for the performers and artists who present, but for audiences, and other artists, who are able to see themselves in the work that other Indigenous and northern artists create. A higher level of infrastructure and capacity is required for artists and curators to present, exhibit and access other venues for disseminating and sharing their work. Where there are institutions of support, with the capacity to curate regular programming, there are more opportunities for performances and presentations. In addition, capacity and opportunities enable networks and individual forms of influence to develop through mentorship, conversations, professional development opportunities, and other career building activities. Most circles cited the need for these kinds of spaces and physical and virtual networks. In smaller communities there are fewer, if any, artistic institutions of support.

Nadine and the members of the Collective discussed the gaps in their own geographical and artistic communities—this includes a lack of opportunities for professional development and mentorship, reliance on external (southern) platforms for dissemination, challenges accessing equipment and training, and the need to control and curate the narrative, the content of work, and where and how the work is shown.

Some people, like Rachel Garrick, have been able to transfer their skills and direction toward digital storytelling, but this is often aided by a connection or existing relationship. This demonstrates the importance of informal mentorships. Rachel had a community connection to Nadine; Nadine helped Rachel become aware of opportunities and networks and acted as an informal mentor. Lately, they've begun to collaborate on projects, and Rachel is showing her film at ImagineNATIVE Film and Media Arts Festival in Toronto, something that happened through Nadine's support, network, and knowledge of the industry. Without this direct relationship and mentorship, it is unclear if Rachel would have been able to follow her interest, gain experience, and become more visible as an artist in this field:

I'm an emerging director and have written, and I'm really into observing. I come from Lac Seul First Nation. Mother of two children and grandmother to 1. I was a publisher for Wawatay and had my own column in the *Sioux Lookout Bulletin*. I've done lots of workshops in Sandy [Lake] and worked with youth. My family is full of storytellers. My mother was a storyteller, my aunts are storytellers. My grandfather was a big storyteller and my dad had tons of stories about Lac Seul. He was a fisherman. And some scary stories too. I was fortunate that my mother and father nurtured my storytelling. I have two books and a film I'm working on. It's about some teaching that my father gave to me and that really impacted my life. I was quite fortunate that I was aware of the [film] opportunity and I took advantage of it. That's one of the things missing. To know about them [the supports and opportunities]. And people may not have the skill sets.
—Rachel Garrick

Often the focus of mentorship and establishing networks has to do with building awareness of opportunities for artists in terms of their career development (exhibitions, screenings, calls for proposals, connections with other artists), but the administrative aspects of being an artist are often overlooked (which runs in tandem with the under-capacity administrative needs of institutions of support). Nadine's circles had similar concerns to others around the region regarding the administrative and business elements of being an artist: understanding the industry and having the capacity and time to manage grant and proposal writing and to establish a financial system, like fee structures and invoicing. Artists who live in remote and rural communities could face significant obstacles. A lack of other experienced artists or cultural workers to provide information and guidance, and not seeing themselves reflected in funding programs, can lead to a reluctance to apply. Family and work responsibilities, too, leave little time for project administration. For example, according to Statistics Canada, 37% of

Indigenous households are lone parent families. Nadine's circle discussed these issues and considered the idea of an administrative network.

I work full time at the National Gallery [of Canada] as an Educator in Indigenous Programs. I'm also an outreach person and we look for a way to work directly with communities. My dad is so eager to get info out. He wants me to go film him making a net, scaling a fish, [he's] hungry for someone to go out and record it. Sadly, because of residential school and how it plays out with our work…because of our disconnection, because of the welfare system and the 60s Scoop he got swallowed up again. I don't have the time to write a proposal to find the people to help my dad [with a film]. I have a full-time job and four kids. —Jaime Morse, *Ottawa/Lac La Biche*

What if we had networks where we could share these workloads, or collaborate on projects? —Nadine Arpin

Establishing and building a network to help facilitate multimedia productions for women—is this [the idea]? —Mona Gordon

Not exclusively for women. But as women we are already under-represented in the digital arts so building gender equality is important, yes. —Nadine Arpin

As a solo production company how [do I] market myself? [The] struggling with being humble but also wanting to promote yourself…not in a way that's so narcissistic…and when you redo your bio and CV you need that extra view or someone else to come in and to make it more. —Phoebe Sutherland

I think if we had a company of Indigenous assistants, people who can type, do invoices, etc., a lot of it can be done remotely. I hear it from everybody, "I don't have time to send out an

invoice…."We're in the art, we're doing the art. [Administrative assistance is] a need a lot of people have, with kids…like with me, trying to be a good citizen and I'm on boards, and trying to fit in self-care. —Jaime Morse

The circles echoed each other in terms of needs related to administrative support; these conversations highlight the nuances in terms of additional challenges faced by Indigenous artists.

The circle noted that Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) often funds training programs in rural and northern communities in an attempt to address unemployment, but Nadine and the circle pointed to the sometimes-ineffectual strategies.

How many WordPerfect administrators, office assistants, can you pump out? This is classic government expenditure mandates where they provide funding with no prospects. I mean there are some ridiculous number of registered plumbers in Lac Seul because they did a program, and everyone became a plumber. It's one skill overkill. Pumping out filmmakers is not the same thing. There's only so many sinks you can fix, but films you can just keep making them. There are so many stories that can be told. —Nadine Arpin

The circle discussed how there might be a good case to advocate to Human Resources Social Development Canada (HRSDC) and other training programs to consider investing in film and media arts capacity by offering training in both technical and administrative functions. This could possibly extend to adjusting and enhancing the training of Office Administration students and graduates so that they learn skills in arts administration and can use their existing training toward film producing or supporting individual artists with their administrative needs. The group discussed how to collectively share the costs of an administrator and other resource sharing strategies.

In addition to administrative support to navigate the system and assist with the day-to-day business of being a media artist, the artists noted that they also face challenges finding skilled people to assist with their projects. In rural and remote communities, there may be none, or only a handful, of skilled filmmakers, producers, or media technicians.

I'm always looking for a producer, I want to try to talk somebody into being a producer. Everyone wants to be a filmmaker; nobody seems to want to [be] a producer. —Nadine Arpin

The film programs in colleges around the region (Thunder Bay, Sault Ste. Marie, North Bay) primarily focus on the creative aspects of filmmaking: screenwriting and directing. Camera work, lighting, and other technical skills are also developed, to a degree, through the process of creating a short film as part of the program requirements. But, as Nadine and others have noted, there are few trained and experienced producers and high-level technicians in the region. Efforts to produce work in the North, by northerners, would be significantly bolstered by accessible training and development that fosters these skills in northerners.

How can we support people so their voices are heard? The biggest challenge is access—skill sets, training…making all these things available to young people. But it seems like when you're older, and you have more time, your kids are grown up, you're discovering your love of film. Now I have the opportunity to learn the skills, but if I weren't linked [to Nadine] I probably wouldn't know anything about them. A website would be great and finding out from filmmakers what are some of the challenges…that's what I meant by an incubator. [We also need] wrap-around supports…when you mix with industry professionals you need high self-esteem. [In the industry] I felt I was being judged on my looks…with low self-esteem

you wouldn't thrive in that environment. We need to prepare people for that stuff. And they do business in a different way. If we are going to mentor or provide wrap-around service there has to be some sort of training relating back to self-esteem… to prepare for what they might experience at higher levels. [It's tough to] face the barriers and challenge it. [I had] confidence and willingness to fight my way through for the funding, but that's not everybody's personality…. How to navigate those requirements? What if you're not a fighter? How do we serve the storytellers that don't have pen and paper but are amazing storytellers? —Rachel Garrick

For older emerging artists, there's also a gap. There's a challenging mindset that this culture has created in our communities. We're told that you're not good enough, that you have to go through this red tape, "you've got to do it this way," and we've internalized that oppression. [We have] our ability to see things in a new way…breaking down those stigmas and stereotypes, and navigate it all, and [find] like-minded people. —Marie Norton

While programs to support self-esteem and mental health may seem unusual requests for a media arts space, discussions about developing the film ecosystem in the North and supporting the production of more work by Indigenous media artists needs to take into account various complexities and inequities, such as the impact of the residential school system, systemic racism, and other legacies of colonization. The group was aware of these complexities; they felt that programs that included "wrap-around" services, such as self-esteem and mental health, would lend critical attention to the full person, as well as to the full spectrum of skills needed for media arts production. The processes and practices that happen behind the scenes—in filmmaking and in the administration of a media arts practice—need to be demystified.

It's not enough to have just an arts facility. It needs to be a robust, full ecosystem of services that has all that mental health support, with that piece worked into the creative component. I have an idea of taking us right out of the [conventional urban] structure. [That structure] is all about business and schmoozing and "who likes me now." [We can] challenge that dynamic and that approach. Remove the Western lens and take a more comfortable path…bring the approach down to a basic around-the-kitchen-table level rather than a potentially overwhelming downtown Toronto event. How do we remove the need to bring our work to these urban centres? It is time to focus on exhibiting here for our own and let the urban come to us. Maybe *we are* the next level. How do we employ the tools available to us…the world is at our fingertips, literally. —Nadine Arpin

I'm supportive of this idea whichever way it goes. You can use us for funding. We're non-profit and charitable. I'm thinking there are costs…how do we get stuff to them if they need it? Whatever they're using, how can we support that? For filmmakers we need cameras. We also need a website where we can exchange and pass on some of these works. Maybe we need help editing. People who are professional filmmakers. We need the time and the hours to pay these people. If we call ourselves a name…maybe Anishinaabe Creativity Circle. —Darlene Angeconeb

The other idea is to look at a kind of filmmaker incubator. Growing people's ideas and supporting people so they can develop film. But the first challenge when you think of filmmaking is you think first it's a hobby, you can't make a living out of it. That's the perception I grew up in.

It'd be great to talk about mentoring and programs to support merging and equipment…in the North here, access to equipment. They talk about different types of cameras and different things that I'm not really technically familiar with, but it might be good that I learn this, so I can pass it on to the next group of filmmakers and to make sure we have training and stuff like that so we can nurture. —Rachel Garrick

What about establishing some kind of workshop, an online workshop approach or maybe workshopping one another's projects if they'd be willing to look at each other's rough cuts, read people's drafts, whatever, listen to people's poetry, and hear their songs. That would be cool. [If we have a] live streaming studio space, it could facilitate those kinds of virtual connections as well. —Nadine Arpin

From conversations like these, Nadine, Rachel, and Darlene (at Equay-Wuk) began discussing the possibilities of a physical space in Sioux Lookout, with their eye on the Mayfair Theatre. The space, once a vibrant centre, has been empty for some time. The city administration is motivated to see it put to use, and has pledged to invest approximately $100,000 to prepare the site for development. The women developed a preliminary proposal that included screening and editing rooms, an artist residency, workshop space, and equipment library—a full-service space led by and for Indigenous artists, that envisioned a networked, supportive ecosystem for artists living in and visiting the community. These in-house services would be complemented by virtual programming, a network, and mobile workshops. A mentorship program and training programs would be tailored to individual artist's needs, with customized training plans for people in front of and behind the cameras, content generators, including a well-being component. They want boot camps, workshops, and a hub member program with links to First Nation community media arts groups, and a networking program to connect artists and professionals to existing media industry

developers and programs. Administrative support would be available to artists for their projects.

The Minwaajimo Collective would like to see Sioux Lookout becoming an active centre for presenting work by and to northerners. Nadine sees the possibilities in attracting viewers from the South as well. This question informed the Collective's newly articulated mandate "to bring the stories of the territory to the world."

People are trying to push to get it [the Mayfair Theatre] demolished, but it is literally the landmark. It is right on the front street of Sioux Lookout, right across from the train station. It's the most beautiful location in the entire town; a little parkette right across the street. The Municipality needs to recognize that the whole downtown infrastructure has turned into office space. Many First Nation organizations have set up offices downtown, filling buildings which were vacant. It will cost the Municipality some $300,000 to demolish the old cinema. So, what the town is prepared to do is remove asbestos and repair the roof, at their cost, with the understanding that someone will develop it.

You don't need the entire building, it's a massive space, it's bigger than any cinema I've been in in the city. But if you could have a portion, if it was designed so a portion could facilitate maybe 100 sitting people, for example, plus a working facility where training can happen. I see it as a building capable of housing many partners, like the Winnipeg Film Co-op, for example. They could have a satellite office, ImagineNATIVE could have a satellite office, etc. What I am saying is there isn't a need to have physical bodies in the building every day, just ongoing virtual support. I see it as a multi-functioning community event space which could be rented…there are many events that could be facilitated housed there including a live-streaming studio space.

Because, like I said, if we were to retain this heritage building, the possibilities could be endless. I see this as a multi-million-dollar, five year–plus project. This is the dream. The reality is who can commit to a project of this scope? It cannot be left to the artists to make this happen. —Nadine Arpin

The City of Sioux Lookout was supportive and invited the group to consider a number of options for independent purchase, collaboration with the City, and a few different options for spaces in different buildings. Meetings with representatives from the City, Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation, and FedNor were promising. A plan of action was developed, and the women were excited to explore the possibilities. They worked with the support of MANO to curate and screen a series of films through the VUCAVU platform in November 2021. This enabled the collective to test out possibilities and to explore how the collective might establish more control over the kind of work screened, the location of screening, and how (from the audience to the structure of the event) the screening would occur.

Story Medicine screened seven films over seven days, presenting work by emerging and established filmmakers from the Northwest. While a seemingly simple presentation of curated work, the process demonstrated symbolic and tangible control over some of the dynamics of visibility. It is extremely difficult to gain entry to the large film festivals—and these are typically in the urban south—yet most filmmakers look to those rare and difficult points of entry as markers of validation and visibility. By curating a screening, the Collective turned the tables: they circumvented the dominant pathways. They articulated their own vision for the collection, presented work that had meaning to them, and focused the gaze on northern work.

Data from VUCAVU shows that the curated selection attracted both existing platform users—many of them curators—as well as new viewers, despite the "clunkiness" of having to create a (free) account to access the films. Viewers were primarily from Canada, but 46% were international, including viewers (in order of highest numbers) in the US, China, Germany, France, India, the UK, Australia, and Ireland. With a platform like VUCAVU, the kind of viewers and the professional platform have more weight than the number of viewers. There were several notable elements that the screenings achieved. First, they reached international audiences and, in particular, curators (seven curators watched the series). This broadens the potential for expanded visibility outside of the dominant urban film circuits and enables additional revenue streams. Second, establishing links with multiple festivals across the region, nationally and elsewhere, can increase audiences and income through screening fees. While many filmmakers look to large festivals like the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) as the symbol of success, the chances of selection are extremely low, and TIFF only provides a single screening (and single fee). An additional benefit of establishing links with multiple festivals is the increased potential to be invited to major festivals, which offers positive outcomes in visibility and marketing options. Third, independent, regional, and rural circuits through galleries and smaller festivals (such as the new Sault Ste. Marie Film Festival, the only festival in northern Ontario with an exclusive focus on independent northern films) create opportunities for higher circulations. This results, again, in greater visibility and changes the prior pattern of screening at a single festival (then not being screened again). Significantly, these shifts to embrace other screening opportunities means that Indigenous filmmakers and curators can define what is important for themselves and make space for Indigenous stories and world views, rather than (hoping) to fit into external curatorial criteria. (For more on the impact of these expanded digital networks and circuits of visibility, see the case study on Beyond Pheasants Contemporary).

As a result of the screening process, the collective was also able to connect with Video Pool and Winnipeg Film Group, both distributors in Winnipeg. This could impact their visibility in additional ways,

given the distributor's reach to festivals, television networks, and other platforms. Many independent filmmakers who aren't invited to festivals make their work available on platforms like YouTube. While YouTube might garner high audience numbers, there is little impact on artist fee income or the development of the filmmaker's career. VUCAVU, as an organization funded by the Canada Council for the Arts, is a recognized and respected platform: filmmakers presented by VUCAVU are therefore recognized in ways they cannot be via YouTube and other commercial platforms. The filmmakers in the collective can include their VUCAVU screening in their CVs, which gives them a step up when applying to grants from the arts councils. YouTube, Vimeo, and other non-curated platforms that do not pay fees don't enable that kind of credential.

This pilot to research and assess the impact of a curated selection of works from Northwestern Ontario was meaningful because it demonstrated the importance of collaboration and the possibilities of curation in the North by northerners. Significantly, this pilot was something that brought the Collective together to work on a targeted strategy that matched and advanced their needs and capacity.

There is a good environment for developing a capital project in Sioux Lookout, where the City is supportive and has some capacity to support a project. While the Ontario Trillium Foundation capital grants have been on hold (funding is redirected to COVID response programs), Cultural Spaces, FedNor, and Ontario's Cultural Infrastructure Fund can provide grants and loans to purchase, renovate, and set up media arts spaces. However, such a project requires significant administrative capacity when considering the preliminary grant applications necessary to access business and strategic plan funding from FedNor in combination with substantial long-term capacity to manage a building and pay for it year after year.

As often happens, artists are aware of the gaps in the arts community, and try to establish networks, councils, and organizations to meet these needs. However, artists and existing organizations may not have either the capacity or the mandate to do this work and need to focus on their own projects. Necessary capacity and skills may not exist in the community, and there may not, over time, be the energy to sustain a project—there is a toll on artists and organizational leaders who take on these development projects. In some cases, municipalities and cities might be able to jump in and assist with preliminary steps, but artists and arts organizations still must navigate the complexities relating to ownership, governance, and direction of the project when working collaboratively or in partnership with a formal, external entity. There are provincial organizations that help to establish cultural spaces in communities, however, as Nadine and others have noted, they may not necessarily understand the community, the model may not work for the local context, and their strategies don't address important long-term issues such as governance, direction, control, and long-term sustainability (including emotional, mental, financial, and human resource capacity). In addition, what is considered a cultural space can be limited. (For more on digital and analogue spaces, see here. For more on organizing and collaborations see here).

In their preliminary proposal, the Collective identified that they needed a coordinator to help get the project off the ground. While Equay-Wuk was identified as a possible project partner, and Darlene has decades of experience and understands the administrative and funding environment, Equay-Wuk doesn't have the human resources to initiate or manage a capital project. Nadine and Rachel are knee-deep in their own media arts projects, and while they have the vision and innovative spirit, they don't have the administrative and funding capacity. The City can support them but also isn't going to build and manage an additional space; the Collective wants a high level of autonomy and direction over the project. Additional challenges are definitions—FedNor will support projects with a strong business case and NOHFC and other

funders support non-profits. How a project is defined from the start can affect its eligibility for funding. In either case, the project would need to generate significant income through workshops, space and equipment rentals, screenings, and other activities to cover ongoing building expenses, and the human resources required to manage the space. It could take years for the project to generate a significant level of operating/core funding and to establish the credibility required to successfully apply for operating/core funding from the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Council for the Arts.

Without a lead administrator and grant writer, the capital project has not moved forward beyond the initial meetings with the City, MANO, and the funders. The artists respected each other's limits and supported each other to dedicate their energy toward doing their work as artists. While the situation is frustrating for them, given the intersecting, and mutually reinforcing threads of need, vision, and available funding, they have focused on organizing what they currently have capacity to do. This includes establishing the Collective, collaborating with Equay-Wuk on virtual film workshops, and exploring virtual screenings of Northwest filmmakers. These initiatives bolster and resonate the idea of "small stories." While the small stories are perhaps less dramatic and visible to the larger community, these small initiatives have helped develop stronger connections and new collaborations between media artists in the region and had an impact on their career development. Less formal collaborations and collectives allow for flexibility to respond to the realities of shifting needs, a changing membership, and varying capacity over time.

The impact of these less formal projects and co-mentoring relationships are important to note. While a single project may come and go, these relationships don't disappear. As we've seen throughout this research project, where there are established artists and institutions of support, we see a virtuous circle of influence. Nadine is one of a handful of artists in the region who have successfully received media arts grants from both the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Council for the Arts. This has an impact on others from her community—they see themselves reflected in her work and her success demonstrates that it is possible to work as a professional media artist and encourages others. She shares her experience and skills and has collaborated with Rachel to help her develop her first projects. Rachel and others benefit from her connections and her network, and they have helped bring attention to their work and their needs.

It is one thing to access a small micro grant such as the Indigenous Visual Arts Materials (IVAM) grants through the OAC but a whole other thing to transition from a micro grant into the regular program streams. (In addition, the IVAM grants typically support visual arts and crafts, rather than media arts. This could be shifted with increased outreach to promote the program to media artists.) To transition successfully, a whole ecosystem of support is required: spaces to exhibit, mentors to help advance artistic approaches and technical skills, capacity in grant writing and other administrative tasks, equipment and time, and clear avenues for disseminating work. For instance, the data shows that only 21 of the 150 Indigenous artists across Ontario who received IVAM micro grants, also accessed regular project grants. As demonstrated in the charts, northern Indigenous artists tend to receive less funding than southern counterparts.

While this needs further study, one theory is that artists in the region, particularly those practicing in rural and remote communities, just don't have the institutions and mentorship ecosystem to support artists to develop their practices and careers in the way that urban and southern artists do. It may be that these artists are applying for lesser grant amounts in regular programs streams and relying more heavily on the micro grants than southern artists.

Region	Indivdual artists funded	Number of Grants	Avg Amount per Artist	Avg per grant	Total amount
N ON	149	175	4,759	4,052	709,066
S ON	168	198	8,473	7,189	1,423,452

6.1 Individual Recipients Funded in All OAC Indigenous Programs (Fiscal Years 2017-2018 to 2019-2020).

Region	Indivdual artists funded	Number of Grants	Avg Amount per Artist	Avg per grant	Total amount
N ON	56	71	11,733.32	9,254.45	657,066.00
S ON	115	136	12,108.28	10,238.62	1,392,452.00

6.2 Individual Recipients Funded in All OAC Indigenous Programs Minus IVAM Grant (Fiscal Years 2017-2018 to 2019-2020)

What these conversations suggest:

Institutions of support: An ecosystem is required to support the continued and meaningful development of media arts practices and careers, such as spaces (virtual and physical) to exhibit; platforms to disseminate work; mentorship and training options; and administrative and technical capacity. One strategy is to nest within an existing organization where strong relationships exist or can be developed, but the nested organization retains control and direction over their work, activities, and governance. In remote and rural communities where there may not be other arts organizations, collaborations with non-arts organizations may prove to be advantageous. These include health organizations, women's centres, Friendship Centres, schools, and libraries.

Models: Models, approaches, and systems need to shift so that they are responsive and relevant to local contexts and communities. They need to be flexible and accommodate both virtual and physical/on-the-ground strategies and they need to be directed and controlled by the community, not by an outside entity.

Physical spaces: The need and desire for physical spaces is a repeated request, yet there are few individual artists and existing arts organizations that have the capacity for this level of management. Further study is necessary to determine the complexities of funding models and governance models, project administration, direction, and control, and the accommodation and flexibility of projects given shifting needs and capacity over time.

Mentorship is an important aspect of professional development in the region; when available, it often leads to collaborations and the development of new work. Very few formal mentorships exist, and informal mentors rarely receive remuneration for their support, training, and advice.

Micro grants help get money and materials into the hands of artists and are intended to help artists begin to develop a funding/funder relationship. The numbers, however, demonstrate that few artists are transitioning from micro grants to regular program streams. The micro grants are typically for visual arts materials and do not encompass the media arts. When artists have strong mentors, they have increased numbers of works created, funding success, and more achievements over the long term. These findings indicate that it may be worth considering media arts specific micro grants for materials, cash for small projects, and mentorship. Mentorship and mutual support are demonstrably effective. There are clearly positive impacts; we need to find ways to support informal and formal mentorship. The expansion of Indigenous Visual Arts Materials grants to include media, and/or the creation of micro media grants will need strategic investments and additional supports (outreach, stable infrastructure, mentorship) to help artists transition into regular media arts funding streams, which includes supporting media arts infrastructure (galleries, artist-run centres, networks, and so on).

Circuits of visibility: Curated screenings through recognized platforms like VUCAVU are good strategies for collectives and other groups of filmmakers to increase their visibility. This is particularly cogent for curators and for distributors who have connections to festivals, television networks, and other streaming platforms. These curated presentations on VUCAVU and other reputable platforms help independent filmmakers reach wider audiences, circumvent dominant access points, and help build professional credibility.

HYBRID SPACES: DIGITAL + ANALOGUE STRATEGIES

Cindy Doire Live at St. Matthew's, November 5, 2020. Photo: Zachary Cassidy, Casa di Media Productions (Timmins).

HYBRID SPACES:
DIGITAL + ANALOGUE STRATEGIES

A lot of the work that I was doing was very land-based and I came to realize that if I wanted to have an audience for my work and get it out there, I would need to switch from live performances, to doing video performances. And so that's what I explored for a while. It was pretty wonderful because I could be there on my own in whatever performance site made sense of the work.
—Mariana Lafrance, *interdisciplinary artist, Manitoulin Island*

I know creative things can come out of this [digital pivot], but what concerns me is accepting all of this technology to the point where it seems archaic to return to interacting human to human. Already artists are trying desperately to be heard in a sea of artists online. Artists didn't have to have a website before. There was no online. Social media platforms require posting constantly and finding your audience. This takes time and energy away from creating the work. Branding yourself is not the same as creating the work. I do it too, but it's pushing things toward more commercialization. When is the creating happening that is not controlled by branding? When do the creative processes happen that aren't focused on how you predict audiences will see you? With every advancement in technology, there is the question of what is lost and what is gained. We are mainly interested in advancement. It wouldn't feel natural to go into a creative process separate from how I've branded myself. Yet this is important for an authentic creative experience—to allow something to emerge that's unconnected from the ways we're branding ourselves. We need this freedom as artists. We're filming ourselves every step of the way. We don't dig deep enough to find the stories we aren't aware are there.

Social media is set up like a popularity contest. Throughout history, there have been amazing works created by unpopular artists. Where would they be today? I have such admiration for organizations that advocate for artists because they're looking at the big picture: what are the trends and how are they impacting artists? Guilds, MANO, Mindful Makers, Work in Culture, etc.
—Eleanor, *mixed-media artist, Thunder Bay*

Eleanor, a mixed-media artist in Thunder Bay, gestures to the nuanced tangles regarding the use of technology by artists and a safeguarding of the creative impetus within the pressures of online visibility: "When is the creating happening, that is not controlled by branding? When do the creative processes happen that aren't focused on how you predict audiences will see you?" These are critical questions for media artists and organizations as they embark on and navigate an increasingly digital approach to dissemination, audience building, exhibition, and networking. In concrete and philosophical ways, the integrity of art creation—the "when" and "why"—may be lost when marketing or branding shifts the work into a "thing" for viewing, purchasing, or exchanging. The energy formerly used for conceptualizing and creating is transferred to the technical know-how, maintenance, and monitoring needed for online visibility, possibly with negative outcomes for individual artists who have to try to find a workable balance between creating, what is created, and the necessary demands of the digital, through and with other realities that impact their lives. Artists must find ways to navigate the process of conception through dissemination, which points to the need for a range of resources, including funding sources, mentorship, and training (for more about mentorship and informal training, see here).

Our conversations with artists and organizations revealed varying degrees of comfort with the use of digital technologies, as well as varying degrees of fluidity between their uses of analogue and digital spaces. Many artists engage in hybrid practices, such as integrating

both analogue and digital forms, or using the digital to disseminate very local, very on-the-ground work, or conversely, creating physical representations of digitally produced work. Some artists are more comfortable adopting technology and, in alignment, accepting the dominance of certain platforms, while some were more excited about the possibilities that technology offered, than others. It became clear that there were also differing types and levels of adaptation to the technology in practice: some artists shape their work in response to the various digital technologies and forms, while others bend the platforms for their own purposes.

Michel Dumont, a queer, Two-Spirit maker and mixed-media artist based in Thunder Bay, experienced a boost to his career as a result of the digital shift that came with the pandemic. He had an existing presence, but the combination of curators in urban areas reaching out to artists outside of their usual circuits mostly within the urban core and the creative use of hybrid exhibitions dramatically affected his exhibition presence:

> The fact that galleries went online during the pandemic, meant we could create a work and it would show up in a gallery—in online exhibitions and in physical shows that let in limited numbers of people. I did a piece that was shown in Paris. The physical gallery in Helsinki and Colorado as well…they had a huge wall of printed digital photographs, and included mine. I did a video in my garage and that was projected along with other images of my work on walls in Toronto. It's fascinating that public art went to projection. I got all this international exposure from the comfort of my own home, through the digital.
> —Michel Dumont, *Two-Spirit artist, Thunder Bay/Lake Helen First Nation*

A high level of digital control can sometimes be more available to senior and established artists, whereas emerging artists and smaller organizations must navigate the complexities of visibility and the financial implications of generating income through digital spaces (for more on visibility, see here). Some artists noted that some types of art and some arts media practices should not—or cannot—be shared digitally without losing the integrity of the work. With the impact of the pandemic on physical exhibition spaces and the growing ubiquity of the digital, most artists and organizations are coming to terms with the fact that digital dissemination, along with digital and online collaborations, teaching, mentoring, and sometimes creating, will continue to be a necessary aspect of their arts practices and projects. In some cases, the digital pivot has opened new avenues for connection and collaboration, particularly for marginalized artists who have experienced varying degrees of isolation from artistic communities. Others, however, found themselves further isolated when local analogue spaces were closed during the pandemic and they were unable to share their work or join online conversations and gatherings through digital means because of poor or inexistent broadband.

Generally, artists expend a lot of time, effort and thought navigating the digital. There are mixed effects, given the expanse of the internet, the numbers of sites, and the range of expectations in terms of views, audiences, networks, and online communities. It is a multi-faceted, far-reaching technology that includes possibilities for sharing, conversation, feedback, visibility, and monetization depending on the platforms and the desired reach. Managing it appropriately can be difficult to judge and to learn because the internet is not linear; there are many possibilities, and each requires continuous sets of decisions to manage. On the whole, when artists and organizations are able to showcase their work in a defined, and curated space that an audience can access easily, whether analogue or digital, they are better able to define their parameters as artists and can increase their traction and impact.

I was able to create space for myself and gain an engaging audience by being unique and really knowing what differentiates me from other poets out there. I really believe that you have to know what kind of space your work holds for you to take on that space. On Instagram, it is very easy for others to disseminate my work and others' work as well, and Instagram has the highest audience engagement than other platforms (website/blog, Facebook, and so on) in my experience. What I see online in terms of artwork inspires me but does not necessarily influence my practices in terms of how I present my work. Seeing others posting and seeing the vast variety of artwork presented in various ways (videos, pictures, voiceovers, etc.) inspires me to change the way I see poetry/belly dance/ dance in general as I consider myself a traditional person. But seeing others' work really showed me that art can take on so many forms that I did not accept before such as certain styles of poetry. —Aseel Hashim, *poet and dancer, Sault Ste. Marie*

It may be that for existing and future emerging artists (with broadband access), digital spaces are a norm. While some artists currently may struggle with the transference from physical spaces to digital platforms or experience a steep learning curve, for other artists, the digital is intrinsically understood because of its ubiquity—and the digital reach is inherently valued. Caydence Belisle, a 15-year-old Indigenous artist in Sault Ste. Marie, finds the internet an accessible space to connect to broad issues and movements that inform her work; the digital enables diverse learning and deepens her art practice:

> The things that do influence me online most often are a part of bigger pictures or issues, these are themes like Black Lives Matter, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, and Mental Health. The way that these influences have made more prominent fronts in my art are, for example, that I enjoy creating representations of women's mental health, and portraying

feelings throughout my works. More often than not, I learn about these things through social media platforms, like the ones I have mentioned before, as I have learned most of what I enjoy doing through the internet.
> —Caydence Belisle, *15-year-old artist, Sault Ste. Marie*

Alexander Rondeau, the founder of Between Pheasants Contemporary (read about BPC here), used the internet to connect artistically with other queer, rural, northern artists. He has since established his hyper-local gallery (in a pheasant coop in Kerns, Ontario) through a sophisticated engagement with social media platforms. Similarly, Jayal Chung, an artist in Thunder Bay, has also been able to connect artistically with other artists through digital spaces in ways that are not always available or safe in her home community. Her engagement as an artist has increased her visibility, and she has reciprocated within her developing network by attending events as an audience member and working to build relationships. Her facilitation skills online have grown. She notes how the digital shift enabled and opened some conversations that weren't happening:

> I'm finding inspiration in accessing Indigenous and Black POC spaces—many are Toronto-based artists. Online technology can increase access for me as a racialized, queer woman artist in Northwestern Ontario. By accessing those online workshops, I'm really valuing my arts skills as gifts to share with others. I really miss gathering with people in person, but there's been a lot of access to arts experiences and art forms [online]. A lot of performance artists are impacted, and I can still be in an audience. It's also enjoyable being able to tune in at home. I've followed conversations with some theatre people who are disabled artists that have been asking for that before the pandemic. And we are now doing it. It's so important to note that artists have been asking. Reflecting on the tech part, as someone who has participated and facilitated, I think about

my own experiences. Including live captions, for example, or demonstrations of a very interactive way with folks via the chat or written descriptions, gives me a lot of ideas and helps me grow into a facilitator who can create supportive experiences for others. —Jayal Chung, *artist, Thunder Bay*

Nadene Thériault–Copeland and Darren Copeland of New Adventures in Sound Art (NAISA) spoke about some of their strategies to reach different audiences in digital as well as analogue/on the ground spaces:

Nadene: It's different for both. For the local area, it's word of mouth, it's print, it's putting up signs. It's getting in touch with key people, getting your things listed on various event pages. And also, on Facebook, there are key people that we know will then post it and we know that it will get to the people in the local area. And that's the way to tackle the local things. In terms of the online Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, it's basically it. We do a lot through Akimbo. We found Akimbo arts promotion to be one of the best to reach a large portion of the artists population, both locally and right across Canada, even international, because they have different lists that you can request to put your things on. And we stuck with them. We think it's amazing what they're doing. We do find that we get some promotion through some of the radio stations, particularly in Huntsville.

Darren: We produce a radio show as well. In a place called Acra in New York, which is a rural area outside Albany, kind of central New York State. They're very similar to NAISA in some ways, but they're focused on radio and transmission arts, and they run a community radio station there. So, they invited us to make a monthly show, which is also available online. It's like a podcast. We post the links of those shows every month; those shows are basically profiles of the artists that we're featuring at that time. Typically, I mean sometimes it strays from that, but

90% of the time, it's like that. And that helps from a publicity point of view as well. And it helps to build knowledge about the work that we're presenting and the artists that we're presenting because it gives them one hour to learn about them. So that is also useful. And also we disseminate. There's lots of people in our field that make pieces that we would call fixed media, which is the kind of the audio equivalent of a film. So, it's studio produced, like a music album. Okay, I guess its equivalence is music. But normally, we would have presented those works with performances with many loudspeakers. But with COVID, of course, we can't. So we've been releasing them on SoundCloud. And SoundCloud itself has its own little audience, and people that follow us through that. Now we're developing a series of videos that will disseminate through YouTube. So all those different contexts have their own little audience based on people that encounter you through their channels.

Nadene: And what we try to do with all of those things is to always have a local version of that going on. It's a little hard to do that with video right now. But for the summer, we're going to have our MP3 players back at our picnic tables. So people can listen to a curated series we'll have on SoundCloud for the summer. And then in the wintertime, we really try to promote each and every track of this SoundCloud album, on Facebook, and feature one a day or every two days. And so bringing people to those pieces. Those artworks eventually get them interested in what we're doing as an organization. We have a lot of content from our past festivals or our past conferences and symposia on our website, and a lot of articles that have been prepared and on the website some are keynote lectures and discussions, roundtable discussions. A lot of our past content is still being utilized by a new generation of media, artists, and students in the field.

One of the functions of public arts funders, such as the Ontario Arts Council (OAC) and Canada Council for the Arts (CCA), is to support research and creation that drives artistic development and fosters critical conversations. It is a competitive process, and an artist can take many years to develop an art practice whereby grant applications, particularly to the Canada Council, are successful. Artists are constantly navigating the tricky spaces between creating new and meaningful work and finding ways to support their practices through granting and other sources. Often grants and other ways of generating income are stacked as funding typically has limited timelines. When grant funds are not successful, or are unavailable, artists often support their work through commercial or public routes that build audiences and generate income, but many artists struggle with the public facing work that maintaining a website and social media presence require, and what it takes to sell work. For media creatives, there are fewer platforms (within both digital and analogue spaces) to sell work, and fewer "products" or works to sell.

> When it comes to getting yourself out there or building connections digitally, it is honestly just as difficult, if not more difficult, than doing it in person. And I think that there's been this veil of ambiguity that has come about over the last decade where things like social media sound very attractive and an easy way to grow your presence or your brand, or a recognition of yourself as an artist. But unfortunately, a lot of those platforms have created many obstacles along the way, because they would like to be paid, generally, in the form of advertising dollars.
> —Ashley Whyte, *multi-media artist, Gore Bay, Manitoulin Island*

Social media was a focus of many discussions, with most participants expressing an understanding of its importance, but a lack of understanding of how to best use it to their advantage.

> I think that there could be something we could look at as a form of a repository in terms of a professional development

format…for artists to say, "Hey, you know what, do you have an Instagram page? Do you want to know how to grow your Instagram page? Can you turn that into money?" Because at the end of the day, we need to eat, and we need to continue doing what we love. And it has to be fuelled by something.
—Neil Debassige, *producer and founder, Fuel the Fire TV, M'Chigeeng First Nation, Manitoulin Island*

Either way, a digital presence and some form of digital dissemination is virtually impossible to avoid, particularly for rural and remote northern artists—although it must also be noted that for these artists, the existing infrastructure often impedes their ability to join the digital in consistent ways:

> New remote working frameworks and digital communications have helped to close a gap in terms of distance—our understanding of "too far" geographically has changed, allowing more northern-based communities and folks to be included and heard. This is similar to those with physical accessibility needs, now having distance-based communication and interaction becoming the norm—accessibility to participate is higher. However, I am concerned about digital and internet-based communication becoming a stand-alone mode of participation/communication, further widening the gap to those folks who either don't have access to the reliable internet and our populations such as youth-at-risk, folks with lived experience of addiction and mental health who can be more vulnerable on digital platforms. How can we ensure that these populations, who tend to already be marginalized within our communities, do not become further pushed to the fringes? —Jaymie Lathem, *Executive Director, Creative Industries, North Bay*

Jaymie further summarized the thoughts and ideas that emerged from her conversations with artists in the North Bay area regarding solutions for those communities without digital infrastructure:

> The large corporations that have the ability to deliver and build digital infrastructure for those in need in Northern Ontario need to do so based on community need rather than increased or potential profit margins and/or government-based grants. Perhaps an incentive such as a percentage of every major infrastructure built in already developed or well-served areas goes towards building equitable infrastructure in community-identified underserved communities. This could be done similarly to Toronto's percentage of infrastructure/new builds which is allocated to public art. Or simply a percentage of overall annual profit is put towards a pool of infrastructure dollars to bring connectivity and digital infrastructure projects to underserved communities. These infrastructure projects also need to be based in ongoing communication with communities to identify the resources and expertise needed to ensure ongoing sustainability and upkeep and affordable if not free pricing for all. —Jaymie Lathem
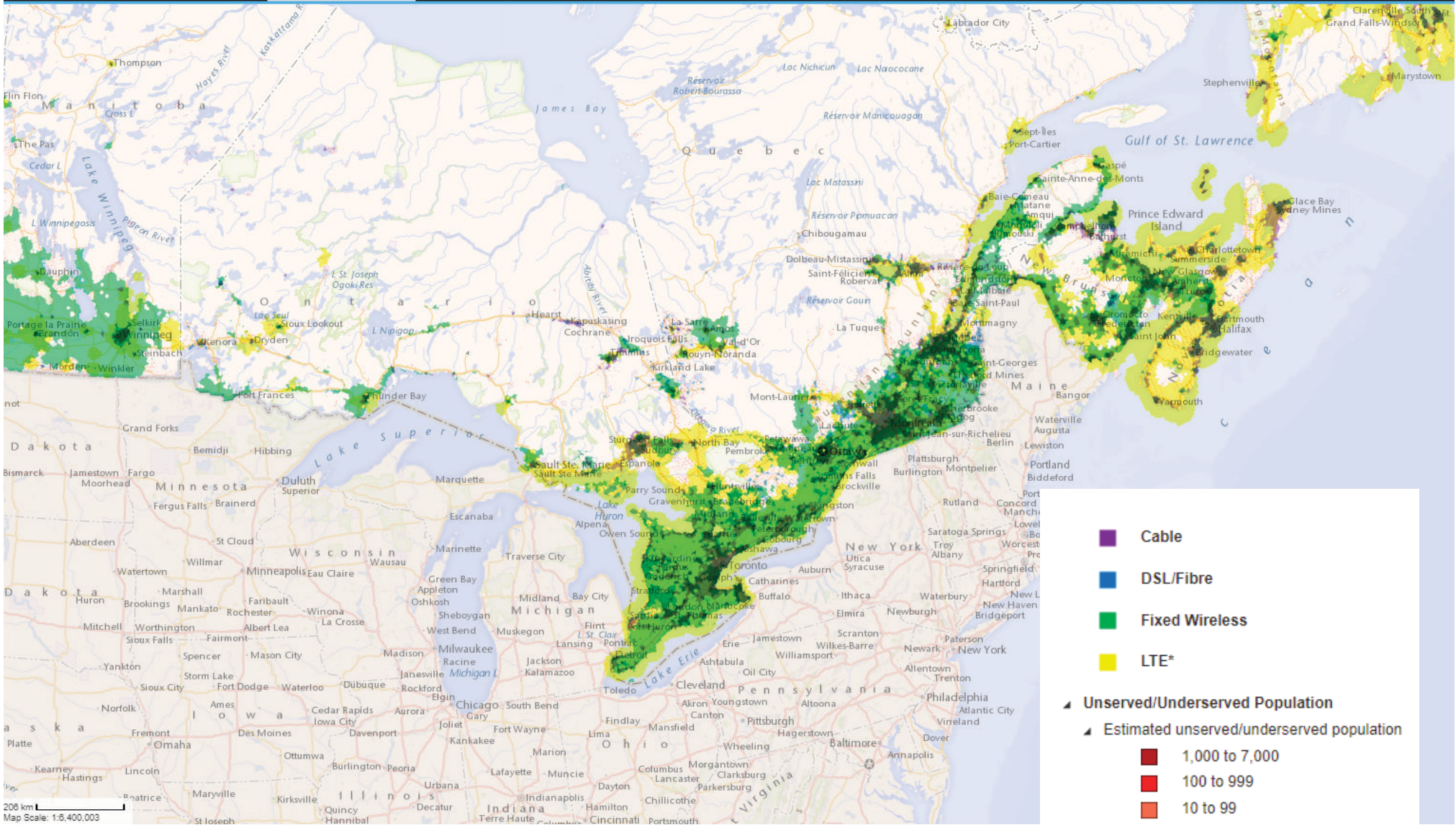
It is critical to understand these concerns about equity and access to digital spaces because while some elements have direct implications for artists in the media arts, other elements are more nuanced and require response from other agencies, organizations, and communities. It is clear from our research that there isn't a single definitive experience for artists and organizations across the region, and that it is important to avoid flattening experiences by assuming that access means the same for all artists, or that all artists want to or can access the digital in the same ways. The digital can be a mixed blessing, even with infrastructure in place. Its variability makes it an attractive option for artists across

the region who want to use it, but sometimes for diverse reasons. For instance, many disabled artists have noted that the internet and digital platforms have facilitated their capacity to connect, reach audiences and disseminate their work. In Kim Kitchen's experience, for example, not only did she need to shift into using digital technologies (sound art and film) when rheumatoid arthritis dramatically changed her life and her artistic practice, the internet has become a conduit for maintaining existing, and building new artistic connections and collaborations:

> My art practice utilizes technologies continuously: computer, internet, recording and capturing, along with the demands of keeping current my ever-growing digital library. I am also conscientious about the documentation of both process and outcome, which is central to the work. Digital infrastructure allows me to create art as a form of access to tell and share my story(s). My experience as a disabled artist has evolved because I now have what feels like unlimited opportunity to attend events, gallery openings, art-making, and other online activities from the comfort of my home. This has made attending possible. Ironically, one positive result of the COVID pandemic is that this digital connectivity has produced/made possible inclusive components such as access, viability, and sustainability. However, to sustain the momentum, ongoing work in this area is a must, and means advocacy, continuous attention to ways of reaching out, listening, and taking action to transform spaces and remove barriers.
> —Kim Kitchen, *multidisciplinary artist, North Bay*

But artists who have adapted to digital platforms for practical reasons have also found that there are limits to how well the digital can fully align with their other forms of communication and art practices. Its reach and broad components can be intrusive and also sideline refined aspects of the artist's way of working. And some disabled artists have noted that digital accessibility still requires being attuned to diverse needs—for instance, attending long sessions set at particular times may not be viable for some people all of the time. In addition, while switching to a digital platform gives artists more freedom to respond to geographic and financial constraints, some have found other aspects challenging, such as the lack of connectivity, the ambiguity of making meaningful connections online, or the sharp learning curves.

> I'm uncomfortable on Zoom, but I do it. I'm getting more used to two-dimensional communication, but also get sick of being "watched." My form of art, of communication, is very kinetic. Using my senses, particularly sight and hearing, is important, but the less common ones maybe more so. Depth perception is really important to me for communication.
> —Tamara Rose, *Thunder Bay*

> Internet connectivity across great distances is amazing, however, there is still a great divide experienced by communities in Northern Ontario with low to no digital access such as many First Nations communities, which may be situated quite close to fully connected urban centres. Virtual meetings can accomplish some business and educational objectives, but First Nations communities and organizations especially miss the relationship-building aspects of in-person meetings, ceremonies, and celebrations such as powwows and community feasts.
> —Maurice Switzer, *President, North Bay Indigenous Friendship Centre*

Neil Debassige, producer and founder of Fuel the Fire TV (M'Chigeeng First Nation), recognizes the positive potential of social media for his media company. He explained that independently learning the intricacies of social media algorithms and techniques was challenging. To supplement his learning and to learn to use the service better, he also subscribed to some paid online training. (For more about information mentorship and training, see here.) Jaymie Lathem, of Creative Industries in North Bay, and the artists in her conversations, felt that what would make digital access more equitable is more social media training for artists—how to use it and adapt it. This would enable a continuous learning cycle of scaffolded learners and experts as the internet, too, changes.

> Ongoing knowledge sharing opportunities based on community needs are necessary to not only become more digitally literate but to continue that learning curve and not fall behind. Many digital apps we use every day are not being used to their full potential. Community experts need to be identified to provide ongoing learning opportunities for our northern communities. Digital videos or training videos can be developed and shared to ensure access is larger than just in-person or one-time sessions. These experts should be paid accordingly for their knowledge, skill set, and time. An open source database could be developed to be shared across northern communities. While YouTube and other platforms do provide a great learning resource for many, there is something more direct and trusting when it comes from someone working within your sector or community. A mutual understanding and respect translates to more confidence for the learner. It also develops networks of local community experts who could be available for follow-up learning and expanded community-wide professional development. —Jaymie Lathem

Yet, Neil Debassige firmly believes that social media is a viable route to sustainable success; he sees there are possibilities for a professional

development program for rural artists that encourages the use of social media as an avenue for disseminating art. His ideas were well received in the Manitoulin circle discussion, and they were echoed by others in the conversation circles and interviews that were held across the region: social media, professional development, and media arts dissemination is of interest as tools that could strongly help artists gain visibility and technical knowledge.

> The one good thing with video is that there are major platforms—YouTube and Vimeo and that sort of thing—and it's a lot easier now than when I was in high school to get people to see an art video that you made: Before, you had to distribute VHS copies. It's much easier now. But, if we're talking about Northern Ontario, then I think it's important to have some sort of local outlet where it doesn't get lost to the masses in a YouTube world…where it's given a little more care, a little more treatment. I find if you're making work for the right reasons, then the work involved with distribution, the business side of things, usually falls by the wayside. I find that for myself and for most of my friends that are artists, this seems to be where we all kind of fail. It's probably where artists need the most help because if they're doing it for the right reasons they're already focused on the next piece of work. They're not doing it to get it seen, necessarily. That's where a curator comes in. That's where an art distributor or something comes in. So, I would say next to funding and just like the initial onset of becoming able to get your work made, that this is the next most important thing. Especially being in the North you're so much further from the big art networks and infrastructure that the cities have…and it's a challenge even there to get your work seen and heard. So that is where I think an outside entity could come here and play a huge role. —Zach Cassidy, *filmmaker, Timmins*

Zach's comment underlines the reach of certain platforms and the supply of work that fuels them. He argues that it is necessary to disseminate work online and that it is of particular importance in Northern Ontario that artists access online platforms that are meaningful, relevant, and accessible. While YouTube and other commercial platforms have the potential to facilitate reaching audiences, work may be rendered invisible among the sheer quantity of videos and other works available online. In addition, the platforms do not necessarily connect to the right audiences. For Zach, it should be a priority that curators and art distributors in Northern Ontario assist artists by thoughtfully disseminating their work; this enables northern artists to present their work in meaningful ways, control the content, and share it through recognized platforms that attract and engage other curators, artists, and audiences. (For more about curated content and dissemination platforms, see the Borderline Radio case study here and the Minwaajimo Collective experience with curating a virtual screening programme here).

Curation is, for many artists, a desired option for managing their work online. It would address a need for both targeted, meaningful spaces along with experts who can help navigate an online presence and represent the artist.

> It's easier to do things in groups. There are only two artists I know who've had art dealers [represent them]. I attend conferences and meet curators as a way to connect. I'm a bit more experiential but I'd like to hire a PR agent and create more for a gallery setting.
> —Caroline Kajorinne Krievin, *multidisciplinary artist, facilitative arts administrator, and founder of Mindful Makers Collective, Thunder Bay*

> It's kind of learn as you go. It's been quite a challenge, but very rewarding. We have over 70 stories now that are posted on a

national portal—commediaportal.ca [through the Canadian Association of Community Television Users and Stations/ CACTUS]—that's accessible. And, you know, we have our website and our Facebook, and I think it's been a great opportunity to really take a snapshot of our community through a very challenging time in our period of history. And we're going to have that archived, as well, for the community.
—Donna Mikeluk, *Schreiber Public Library CEO and Schreiber Media Centre Board Director*

It is possible to have more than one curated space for digital projects, as well as multiple curators—the advantage is that of greater distribution and visibility. For example, there are digital projects available online through the local library in Schreiber; these stories, generated from the Schreiber Media Centre project, are distributed and made visible through the Centre as well as through the curated digital space of CACTUS, a national organization which also acts as a database. Access to the internet, or to online spaces, is one aspect of digital representation. It is of additional relevance that this access is managed and curated so that there is, equally, a connection to principal audiences and control over how an artist's work is presented online.

Nadya Kwandibens, a highly acclaimed photographer known for her large-scale urban photographic installations (who works under her company name Red Works), was asked if digital platforms had more efficacy in terms of reaching and engaging with audiences than analogue platforms such as exhibition spaces. She affirmed that the digital is critical and urgent; in her case, it allows audiences to engage more fully with her work. Her use of particular platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, has established a well-developed network, and she is personally active in curating, monitoring, and managing her work online:

Absolutely, right from the get-go, that [digital] is *the* means that people have been able to really see my work and really just connect with it. I spent a lot of time on the road, like, actually off-road, right. And that work has to be put somewhere, right? So I have built all these networks across all these different social platforms to disseminate. A lot of people resonate with that. And rightly so. I mean, I want your stories to be absolutely truthful, like the gut and core of it. And I'm not afraid to go there. I'm not afraid to tell the truth. So, and I think that message is what people really want, and need, and to represent that Anishinaabeg way since I am an Ojibwe woman. So obviously, my reality would be different from other people, but it really just comes down to that—just be truthful, honest, and to use social media, and being online in that way is definitely, I think, the main reason that most people know about Red Works and what I'm doing.

I have a large network, pretty much across the board. But mostly what I look at is Facebook. Instagram would be the other main source. I am actually really interested in how Red Works get seen, wherever they get seen, in different avenues and streams that we're all involved in.

Yeah, absolutely. I wouldn't have past and present exhibitions coming up or future exhibitions if they didn't see my work online. I make sure to curate my social media feeds, especially Instagram. Instagram would actually be the place that I have the most impact on this weird world. It's called influencers... Instagram did a feature on me a few years back. So that's where a lot of the followers come from. They're mainly non-Indigenous. I have my own circle, sure, but I had a huge influx of followers after the feature that Instagram did. So yeah, Instagram is a huge audience. All these terms are so weird… influencers, or, you know, followers, all this sort of jargon…

it's hard for me to say that, because really, all I'm doing is…I'm actually out there, right on the land in the communities, doing that one-on-one work, really. And that takes a lot of energy. So, I just wanted to sort of bridge some of the language that we have to use nowadays, when we talk about that. So just to say that, it's not about gathering followers.

I'm photo based, but also actually getting into some video, and document[ary], you know, some video work. And even more so from there. So, I feel like the opportunities are definitely present, and necessary, and urgent, right now.
—Nadya Kwandibens, *artist, Animakee Wa Zhing #37 First Nation*

A thoughtful approach to the use of digital platforms as means for disseminating work and reaching audiences can help, not only with curating the content an artist shares, but also to identify what is important or necessary to share and with which audiences. While some artists have noted that various platforms influence what they create (as well as the format), Nadya uses online platforms care-fully and notes that there are core influences that motivate her pieces. In an interview with Stephen Fox-Radoulovich, she shared her approaches to using social media, which is influenced by why and how she does her work, how she distinguishes between audiences, and her career as an Indigenous artist.

Instagram is more so non-Indigenous people wanting to know more. But my Facebook inbox is more people who know me that have projects they're interested in, or that they want me on or, or I messaged them.

I think one of the main things for Red Works and me is just that there's so much content out there, and recently, on my Instagram, I got both accounts, some monetized. So I can do sponsorships or all that. But I don't even really do that. I don't

want to. I feel like I want my work to remain organic and natural as you would hear it through the moccasin telegraph, that's who I am. And that's how I think people know about Red Works. [They] know what I do and all that is by moccasin telegraph. I've traveled so much. I know so many cousins and aunties. And you know what I mean…word spreads that way, but I also still have to take part in the social platform sort of thing. I think, when I was first starting out, this was years ago, though, years ago, I would do paid sponsorships just to help me do my bookings for my tours that I did across country. But now, I don't really need to do that. If I posted that I was going to, say, Vancouver, I would get bookings. But that's the word. That's word of mouth, by social media.

Foremost, I do it [my work] for us, I do this work for Indigenous people. It's for us, and along the way, when people you know, when people get to understand what our history is, and they really get into it, that's where another life of Red Works lives. So, there's so many different facets around what Red Works is, and it's just me, I don't have a team or anything, it really is just me. Sometimes I do, like I mentioned before, the paid sponsorship type things online, but for the most part, I don't do that anymore. It really is word of mouth. I like to keep things really simple, organic, person to person, and a lot of people understand who I really am or understand what Red Works is about. To keep that concept, and those roots present, anything that I post online is really important. There are businesses that are wanting to reach out with help to promote their brand, and I always make sure that whatever I do promote as a, for want of a better word, influencer, I make sure that their products are entirely Indigenous, that it comes from a really good place. —Nadya Kwandibens

This care fullness is shared by other artists when they are considering which platforms they want to use and ways of encouraging audience engagement from the digital into sustained and off-line spaces (for more on care full approaches, see here):

> The thing that matters most to me right now is finding a way to both collaborate with artists creatively but also finding the "audience" for the creative work. For me, it's not a matter of quantity but quality. In other words, it's not so important how many people I reach through my work, but how long their interest is sustained. So how do we/I sustain engagement beyond a quick "like" on a social media button? With the limitations we now face, how do I create work that can somehow move beyond the screen of a computer or phone and into the minds and hearts of others?
>
> I'm continuing to find non-Zoom ways to do community engaged arts. Zoom is not my first choice. Not at all what I want to do. It's incredibly exhausting. With Zoom you have to stretch your energy, but there are no bounds, you don't know if it's far enough [unlike when you facilitate in person]. I've even been sitting on funding because I couldn't figure out how to do the community engaged aspect of the project (my work is with people who have Alzheimer's). I'm nervous about the idea of a "new normal." I know that creativity can blossom from boundaries and restrictions. What I don't want to see happen is that we put so much into our online presence as artists.
> —Eleanor

What prompts care full approaches differs from artist to artist. Some artists or individuals in an audience or community are vulnerable to the pervasiveness and exposure that the internet enables. Using online methods of dissemination might place some at risk.

I have a love-hate relationship with being online. My book came out during the pandemic, so I had to launch it online. And I understood that I needed to use social media to sell. But I'm often working with groups and organizations where there's a sensitivity, sensitive issues, and I'm more aware of those things not needing to be a big social media splash. And people can just really relish that experience because it's different than the online experience. It's not that I don't want to be personal, but I want to do it in person. I'm private. I want to be in a room together to have those conversations. I'm not looking for community on social media. I feel there's more of a community through a group email. They feel more like a part of my life and I care about the engagement. Social media is counter-intuitive and counter-creative for me.

We're in survival mode, in terms of being seen and heard as an artist. I'd love to see alternative social media platforms—many, many platforms so we aren't trying to be heard among millions on the same one because it's stressful. I want everyone to read the book *Antisocial Media* to understand the power we've given to a monopoly [Facebook/Instagram]. It may be interesting to look at a resurgence of collectives or at least working collectively to problem solve. By collectives, I mean likeminded people who find ways to support each other so people aren't trying to do everything alone. And maybe get rid of the "likes"? That would be my first suggestion. People can engage in the comment section. Get rid of the addictive components, the advertising. Ultimately, there's pressure. It can be very destructive for mental health, like posting something impulsively or too personal. It's not a safe place for people who don't have total stability. If you're struggling with your mental wellness, it's a real hot potato. Before social media, you could keep reinventing yourself and start again without the lingering effects of whatever it was posted. —Eleanor

Most of the conversations referred to some detrimental aspects of dominant online platforms, such as the way algorithms that operate platforms dictate formats and audiences rather than the artist or media arts organization controlling the curatorial approach. Many artists spoke of wanting alternative platforms through which they could have more freedom and control to disseminate their work and discover and build relationships with other artists.

> Wages have been flat for 40 years. This isn't limited to artists being underpaid. It's everyone. But it hits artists hard due the gig economy framework and its distribution avenues. As you know the only people making any money in this tech world are the intermediates—tech platforms. The question becomes: How to gain control over access to consumers? Again, its access—access to the market. What would a new model look like? The tech platform is still needed, but the ownership over the distribution network is where there is space for new models. Perhaps a cooperative model might work here.
> —Jude Ortiz, *Senior Research Coordinator, Northern Ontario Research Development and Knowledge (NORDIK) Institute, Sault Ste. Marie*

The dominance of major social media platforms makes the digital an attractive avenue for artists (if they can carve out a care full space in it). It is a challenge to establish an alternative, especially given that it would result in a vastly reduced real, and potential, network and considerable resources would be needed to maintain its viability.

> I feel like the internet is so vast and intangible that it is hard to comprehend or feel confident that you can own any digital-based or housed content. I do feel like the way or approach to maintain control/ownership and access to content, knowledge, and infrastructure is through partnership. A partnership where each individual organization and/or entity controls their content

and is available or shared with those who form equitable partnerships. In this approach it is beneficial for both parties to support the other to ensure shared content remains open. This also creates a dynamic where a more supported, larger organization, institution, business, or corporation is mandated or feels compelled to build and maintain long-lasting, equitable relationships, possibly providing resources to those partnering communities/organizations. —Jaymie Lathem

Organizations, arts administrators and artists have mixed relationships with the digital. While analogue formats might be preferred by some because of familiarity or the ways it showcases their work, digital platforms are widely recognized as imperative for dissemination and visibility. They're also recognized for their potential to provide new forms and forums for their work. They're not generally considered, however, as a full replacement for analogue formats. Digital platforms are included as means to supplement the analogue.

> We live in the live media. That's our bread and butter. There's no video, nothing that can match a live experience especially with a community orchestra…we try to put on a good show, but these are your friends and family. We're part of the community…you want to see them perform. We have to live here. The arts are a pretty small world. There's a lot of turnover in the city. We had people tuning in to these live streams from around the world, people that had lived here then moved far away (like South Africa, for example). One of our biggest challenges is geography. The live streams are a neat way to connect with people…I think in future, this is what I'd like to do…I'm discussing it with the board. —Josh Wood, *Music Director, Timmins Symphony Orchestra*

> I use the internet and remote communication daily in my arts administration role. With the onset of COVID this way of working became the only feasible way to communicate. While

I self-identify as an analogue person, I have had to learn how to navigate remote working and communication structures. My art practice is heavily centred around an analogue way of working. Pencil to paper. However, with such a long pause on in-person exhibitions, I have felt the overwhelming need to digitize my art practice. Develop new ways to exhibit and push out my works in a way that welcomes internet and digital-based media.
—Jaymie Lathem

New Adventures in Sound Art (NAISA), based in South River, has been working between digital and analogue platforms for some time—through online symposia, workshops, and curated experiences—in order to reach and maintain audiences. They support work of varying scales across both local and international geographies. During the pandemic, they began integrating in-person education and arts practice with online components and dissemination. Overall, they continue to rely on on-the-ground engagement to build local audiences and generate income. But as a result of their efforts to explore virtual spaces, they are discovering ways to use digital platforms to attract audiences into the sphere of the local. Nadene Thériault-Copeland, the Executive Director, described how some of their activities flow between the analogue and the digital (for more about NAISA's analogue/digital approaches, see here):

> Often we work with an artist who has a theme, a text-based score, or something. And then we have a series of workshops that teach people how to do something, whether it's to record or learn how to improvise with the text or whatever. And pieces get recorded. And then there ends up being this community project. The outcome is that there's a listening party at the end, and everybody listens to everybody else's work. And that's all virtual. That's done with people from around the world and Canadian artists participating from different provinces. So, it was community building from more of an international level. And

there were people who came for one session just to find out what a text-based score was, because they had no idea. So, it's kind of building an audience for sound and media art, because there just seems to be a lot of interest, but not knowing what it is.
—Nadene Thériault-Copeland, *Executive Director, NAISA*

The experience of musicians, however, has been somewhat different. Adrian Vilaca, the founder of Borderline Radio (to read about Borderline, see here), explained that Sault Ste. Marie is thriving as a site for music creation, but that musicians aren't getting attention, locally or otherwise. To increase audience, Borderline Radio established hyper-local curated podcasts. Vilaca anticipated (and hoped) the podcasts would attract attention and increase future analogue presentations. Jennifer McKerral is an agent for a number of Northern Ontario musicians, including Nick Sherman. Like other musicians during the pandemic, Nick began presenting streamed concerts to maintain, build, and connect to his audiences; he also developed podcasts to launch a new album. Touring in the region (or elsewhere) was impossible during the height of the pandemic, but live shows are already challenging options in the region; they are highly dependent on a network of peers (for more on the importance of local peers, or in-the-know "magpies," see here), amid constantly shifting performance spaces:

> In terms of presenting and touring and exhibiting, that is even so hard between cities. In other northern communities, it's "What's up? Where's the new place to play?" because those types of businesses are unsustainable for music performance. They pop up and they go away all the time. So, the audiences in small cities, they're always going to be going to a new place, and then you play at the place that you *thought* was the place, but no one goes there anymore. And, you know, you can promote as much as you want, but it's just not where people go anymore, and you have to have those peers in other communities to know. So, I think that's probably the number one thing that people

rely on each other for, no matter what level they're at. There are no resources for performance spaces, at least for music, because a lot of them are not performance spaces, primarily, but rather, restaurants and bars that operate their private businesses that can't access public funding. And then, there's no industry support, either. There's no conference for that kind of stuff. Or at least, there's no support for them to be going there. It's not really the norm. You can't financially justify paying somebody a salary to book shows in a small city where you can't rely on attendance. And it is a full-time job. Booking and promoting is huge, especially if you're going to do it in any kind of an inspired way. If you're actually curating...in Sault Ste. Marie, for example, there was that laundromat kind of restaurant. And, you know, these are all just businesses that are struggling, without even considering the music presentation aspect of it.

—Jen McKerral, *music agent and co-organizer of*
    Up Here Festival, Sudbury

Musicians and artists in the region often rely on non–professional or semi–professional spaces to present work. These spaces themselves are often subject to a variety of struggles, and many have permanently closed since the pandemic. While the digital pivot has created opportunities to reach new and established audiences, the importance of physical spaces was underscored throughout the conversations. One pattern that has emerged from conversations with northern artists is that where there are physical spaces, there are active (and established) artists that inform and influence the artistic practices and the level of conversation in communities across the region. Professional exhibitions and presentations can help build an artist's profile and capacity to become established and access grants, particularly at the level of the Canada Council. The experiences of musicians, media artists, and organizations point to the need for local animators, local infrastructure, networked locals, collaborations and partnerships. It also points to the need for strategic investments and more examination of how to support

professional infrastructure in the North as artists of many disciplines struggle to find spaces to perform and present work. Jude Ortiz, the Senior Research Coordinator at the Northern Ontario Research Development and Knowledge (NORDIK) Institute, would like to see existing spaces—such as restaurants, libraries, closed (and open) shops, municipal spaces, production studios, community halls, and school auditoriums—maximized for multi-use purposes with proper lighting, staging, and other equipment. She notes that investments to enable existing spaces to be used as exhibition and performance spaces would be less costly than new builds and would respond to the particular needs and infrastructure of each community. The importance of professional galleries (see the BPC and the 180 Project case studies here and here and the use of the Rolling Pictures studio for local exhibitions here) and other institutions of support are integral to cultural, social, and artistic infrastructures; ongoing, identifiable spaces and arts activities build local arts ecosystems, including the development of networks for northern artists and viable examples for future artists to work within local communities in the region.

Sarah Nelson, an animator and the Northwest Lead at CatalystsX in Thunder Bay, spoke with several artists and arts organizers. One of the needs they identified was a physical space for Indigenous artists:

> One of the biggest things I am currently motivated to do or create is to create a physical space, where we need no permission to go there. If we are going to run programs, we [can't work within a set] time frame. Sometimes we can powwow until 10 p.m. at night. [But in some spaces] you have to go home. Or you're not allowed to start until 10 a.m. In our ceremony ways, they start at sunrise, we practice teachings, blessings, regalia. [In settler spaces, we] require by-laws, we have to have permission. We want a space and place. We have to be a part of the city's conversation. I want our own space. I want it to be in the city by-laws, in the infrastructure. To do our own thing. Thunder Bay,

these are our people. Doesn't matter if you are a minority, these are our things, we need to be included. Now Thunder Bay is talking about inclusion, but we were never in the conversation. First Nation contributions bring in millions of dollars. We have a huge impact. What do we do moving forward? Need to know what your strength is, what our power is, know what you bring into the conversation. —Anonymous

They put their Fort and their Port on top of the land without thinking about what they were taking away. Land is a huge thing. At Six Nations, we're ceremony rich and land poor. You guys are land rich. The Indigenous people in Northwestern Ontario need a space that is truly theirs, and that is tax exempt. We know how to run our own spaces. This idea of always asking permission has been ingrained in us by outside things (beyond 500 years), outside forces, how you act and how you want to be. You see it in our art, hear it in our songs, silent resistance that continually appears, mostly in the arts because when it gets to culture, we've almost had our cultures programmed right out of us by government programs.
—ElizaBeth Hill, *singer-songwriter and multidisciplinary artist, Mohawk from the Six Nations of the Grand River Territory, Thunder Bay*

We need a space, infrastructure. I would need to know if there are funds available. How many artists? What are they focused on, and the location of these artists in the city? The venue, how long do we have that space for? I would look for grants. Here's a grant for your supplies. I could use a silk-screening machine, to help me make things I could create. I could use a $2,000 grant, but who we going to allocate that grant to? How are we going to identify which artists, [and not] take it from another artist? In LA we have the Red Pages. We need some type of directory.

What does this organization have to offer artists?
—Anonymous

Through my work with IPAA (Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance) I am collecting that to create an info portal, with industry, funders, and collectors, getting all those people involved. There is a need for that. I know NAN [Nishnaabe Aski Nation] also had some support services for their artists, they brought in artists to their territory. My vision was to observe, to spend a year learning, then wading my way back into this world here. I'm still doing the work, but don't have same basis you had before. Facebook is a great platform…George [Lone Elk], I probably wouldn't have met you otherwise. [And this is] a great opportunity to talk about things and our experience. Same with ElizaBeth [Hill]—the way you approach and see things, as a mid-career or later career person who is more or less showing people the way. You're on the right track. My own goal is to create a performing arts centre for Thunder Bay. We have the money. We know we are a tourist attraction. It's a big powwow.
—David Wilkinson-Simard, *Northern Ontario Regional Coordinator, Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance, Thunder Bay*

David Laronde, an Indigenous musician from Temagami, also spoke to the need for a physical space in the Tri-Town area, noting that a space can lead to creativity and collaborations. This sentiment resonated across the conversations in the region. As with informal mentorships that are responsive and generative in ways that formal mentorships sometimes aren't, and the way that formal meetings in digital spaces can limit creativity, collaboration, and experimentation by the virtue of the format, the requisite timing and other "edges," physical spaces that have an openness and are artist-driven can enable a different kind of engagement.

Thinking about the art gallery in Sault Ste. Marie, it's basically just an empty project where people could go in and set up and just think for say, a two- or three-week period. For example, the guy could bring a synthesizer to this project when he's done whatever creation he wants, then people can see it and learn from it as well. If there was a building around [here] that had a room that could be a different project room, it could spawn a lot of ideas and a lot of different kinds of projects. Especially with the recording and video games and whatnot. It's just the space to create. —David Laronde, *musician, Temagami*

For Indigenous artists, there is a particular need for culturally relevant spaces that are controlled and directed by Indigenous people. Digital spaces enable increased access and allow for meaningful connections and collaborations, but not all work, teachings, processes, and creations can or should be shared digitally or broadly. (For more on protocols and issues with online dissemination, see here and for safe spaces, see here). Community gatherings, in person and on the land, continue to be central for many artists. And, as Sarah Nelson shared, Elders have warned that the internet and the digital will not always be here, and to re-learn to be without it.

The Elders and Knowledge Keepers speak of a time when we won't be able to rely on technology. It is embedded in our Anishinaabe prophecies and stories. This is why they are always encouraging us to get back to the land and learn all we can about the land, not only because it is healing now, but because in the future we will be in a time where it will be all we have and that land technology and knowledge that was once so prevalent among our people will come back into play. Other nations will need to choose a path as well and will come to us for help, so we have to be ready for that.
—Sarah Nelson, *Northwest Lead (Project Manager), CatalystsX, Thunder Bay*

What these conversations suggest

Hybrid, fluid and integrated spaces: Throughout our conversations with artists and organizations we heard about the adoption of fluid arts practices that adapt easily between analogue and digital spaces. No single model can accommodate all artists, all practices, and all approaches. Programs, projects and funding need to recognize this fluidity and design flexibility into definitions and program development.

Maximizing the capacity of spaces (and artists): Both analogue (on the ground) and digitally mediated online spaces address different needs for artists. In many cases, digital methods can draw audiences to local spaces, and vice-versa. The most successful artists, and their projects, are care full; they curate projects using digital methods and connect them to physical spaces.

Training and mentorship: Many artists noted struggles with technology, platforms, and how to disseminate their work and build their profiles online. Targeted training, mentorship, and funding to help northern artists develop strategic, curated approaches are needed to help artists navigate digital platforms. It is important to ensure that a range of approaches are available for disabled artists, digitally isolated artists, and for artists with lived experience of mental health and addictions; this will enable strategies that are meaningful, appropriate, safe, and culturally relevant. Given the dominance of digital methods, and particular platforms, artists need support in order to apply sophisticated approaches when using these tools.

Visibility: Digital methods provide different avenues and audiences for artists and organizations; some organizations and artists have developed sophisticated approaches to reaching these audiences and increasing their visibility. Critical writing, curated exhibitions and other care full strategies can help establish northern artists and their work,

but currently there are few avenues to publish critical writing. Many artists struggle to gain the necessary capacity and knowledge to build online exhibitions: curated support by arts organizations is important for building an arts practice, but many organizations in the region are overcapacity and cannot offer this service effectively.

Infrastructure: In addition to mentorship, institutions of support that navigate between analogue and digital spaces are needed in the region. These institutions need support to build their capacity. The current digital infrastructure is inequitable and not available or is consistently unreliable in all communities.

NEW ADVENTURES IN SOUND ART (NAISA):
SOUNDING OUT DIGITAL + ANALOGUE SPACES

Tosca Terán, *The Mycorrhiza Rhythm Machine* (2021). Interactive sound installation. Curated by New Adventures in Sound Art (South River).

NEW ADVENTURES IN SOUND ART (NAISA): SOUNDING OUT DIGITAL + ANALOGUE SPACES

> Sometimes we, especially as Canadians, get a little bit too cautious around what our public will think of us. We're not as bombastic as the neighbours to the south. So that can be to our detriment actually. Sometimes we prevent some possibilities from happening, because we're too self-conscious.
> —Darren Copeland, *Artistic Director, New Adventures in Sound Art, South River*

> We created a new paradigm. We flipped it on its head. We moved away from the city instead of toward it.
> —Nadene Thériault-Copeland, *Executive Director, New Adventures in Sound Art, South River*

New Adventures in Sound Art (NAISA) was a well-established and respected organization when it moved from Toronto to South River in 2017. NAISA is a non-profit organization that presents performances and installations that span the spectrum of electroacoustic and experimental sound art. The organization has long maintained an interesting relationship between its local and international audiences in its work to build engagement with contemporary media and provide curated opportunities for sound artists to experiment, exhibit, and collaborate. It has often had to accommodate work of varying scales and operate across geographies. In addition to its support of artists' work, NAISA is diverse in its programming; it offers workshops, lectures, symposia, and demonstrations that teach a new perception of sound and strengthen multidisciplinary artistic networks.

Darren Copeland, the Artistic Director, and Nadene Thériault-Copeland, the Executive Director of NAISA, had a virtual chat with Sophie Edwards in 2021 to discuss the organization's shift to South River and their experience, as an organization formerly based in Toronto, in a rural community. They discussed how the pandemic has affected NAISA's methods of engaging its audiences, given its history of primarily direct interactions. Like many organizations, the pandemic necessitated a shift to an online space (working within local bandwidth capacity) but also propelled the need to reimagine their curatorial and educational programs. This process shifted their audience too: they rekindled their international connections using digital platforms during the pandemic and, while they now also use these as a container through which they offer their exhibits, workshops, symposia, and dissemination of work, their methodology continues to be informed by careful curatorial practices, a commitment to presenting contemporary and leading edge work, and an engagement with critical conversations along with maintaining an active presence on the ground.

Between Pheasants Contemporary ([see more here](#)) launched and developed its audience and built its curatorial circuits through an online platform during the pandemic, whereas NAISA used online means to reconnect with audiences. Both organizations have nuanced and direct local relationships; they understand that context is important. They have found ways, using different virtual platforms, to curate highly contemporary work in very rural locations and maximize their international audiences and their connections to contemporary practices by accessing circulating networks in or with the digital.

As we've seen with other organizations and heard from artists across the region, there are very dynamic, fluid, and complex relationships between local and global communities, and between analogue and digital forms. Even with very engaged and active international audiences (that pre-COVID, travelled to NAISA), the local remains an important nexus for the organization. NAISA's successful move to South River—bringing its audience with it—demonstrates that contemporary work can thrive in a northern rural environment. The urban core is not the

only avenue for artists to exhibit or validate contemporary work. As Nadene notes, "We created a new paradigm. We flipped it on its head. We moved away from the city instead of toward it."

What follows is an excerpt of the interview. The full interview is available in the MANO archive, and other excerpts can be found elsewhere in this report.

Nadene: We approached our board and asked for permission to start looking for a space up here. And that took quite a while. There's nothing for lease: you either buy, or you don't have a space. There was really nothing. So, I think there was like, I don't know, there were a few RFP's put out by the town, and they tried to connect us with somebody. At any rate we decided, well, we're in a small town and just like you normally do in a small town, you just tell everybody what you want. And eventually something will show up. And that's what happened. The owner of the building called us and said, "Oh, I hear you want to buy a building," and I said, "We can't buy it. But we'll be happy to lease it from you for five years to see how it goes." And so we're at the end of our five-year lease this year in December. And now we are hoping to buy. We don't know whether she'll agree to a price that we feel we can afford here. But there are places in the region that we could purchase for around what we're looking to spend and we found an organization that seems like they're a good fit as a lender and we're hoping that we'll have a space by the time our lease runs out.

So we really do want to stay. It's become a hub, even in the pandemic. I mean, we're still here, we're still doing outdoor things. People know they can find art here in the summer. So, even if we move to another location, we'll still pick somewhere, whether it's on a main street like Sunridge, something central, something where we're within foot traffic or whatever. So, yeah, the response has been really, really amazing. The fact that we have the cafe brings people in, but we've also been able to work with the school kids here on three to four different projects

over the last two summers and the summer camp that is at the Enviro-Centre. So that's promising for being able to continue with that kind of thing. We'd like to expand on it. But I think, you know, the pandemic's just put us into a kind of limbo space. We are not making too many plans until things are more stable. I think owning a building is key to that because it will give us stability, and we need to be able to have enough funding to allow for the training of a new person. Right now we're just operating on a shoestring, really, like I mean, our budget is, what, $140,000 a year. It's crazy. And, you know, $20,000 is rent and a large portion is for the arts event. So there's not very much left over for wages. I think our wages are somewhere around $65,000 a year, and that's split among six employees. So that's not really enough to be able to bring somebody in who's maybe going to be the facility coordinator, let's say, or something like that, that you can start training and have a buddy system to get to the point where they need to be able to run the organization. So that's one of the key things is buying a building that we can then branch out from.

When we were going through COVID, in the very beginning, he [Adam Tindale, *Ontario College of Art and Design University professor and NAISA Board member*] forecast exactly where we were going to be in a year's time. And that advice was invaluable, because right away, it's like, let's put everything outside. Let's go virtual, we're not gonna be open, let's just deal with it. And so, yeah, it was really helpful, and a lot of our audience is still in Toronto. We're still finding now that since COVID hit, the reconnection with our audience from afar has been rekindled. And it has actually put us back in touch with our international audience. And we're finding we are getting a nice kind of niche community in different places around the world.

Darren: Yeah, because when we were in Toronto, we used to host sometimes two symposia a year, and those would attract international people. So, you know, we'd get 30 to 50, 60, 70 people, depending on the symposium. And only a handful of them would be from Toronto,

when we were doing these in Toronto. So then when everything went virtual, some of those people started attending our events from their homes. And then, of course, other people found out about us. So we were having audiences anywhere, from people waking up in the morning in Australia, to people who are staying up in the middle of the night in Europe. And then of course, people from Ontario still made up half the audience. And some events we did with local artists, well, not, he's not so local. He's [Sandy McLennan] in Port Sidney, but, when we had him, we got an audience. So that had quite a lot of people from Muskoka and Almaguin Highlands regions attending online. And, and I think, yeah, some of those might have come if we did it here. But I think it was also appealing that they didn't have to travel on a November night wherever they live because one of the things that we found here was it was hard to get people out for an eight o'clock at night show, because someone would have to drive half that time on a rural road, whereas you'd rather just stay at home. So, the virtual shows have been actually…I didn't think they would appeal to people here in our region because of the slow internet aspect but we found a way to work around that, with the way we do the events that the slow internet doesn't matter so much.

We're using a platform called Whereby. It's similar to Zoom, but it's a different web conference platform. The reason that we like it is that when you present a film or audio piece, or whatever, it streams from that server directly to the user. So, for instance, it has an integration with YouTube. If we put what we're showing that day on YouTube, we basically launch that link, and then suddenly you come out of this meeting environment, and it switches over to a video, and the bad quality connection from South River to the audience is eliminated for the artwork. Also, the audio quality doesn't pass through all of the processing that happens with Zoom, and Whereby and in the meeting environment, so that we can communicate without getting tons of feedback. The other way around our poor internet is not doing live streaming of performances. The only time we've done that is if the artist

was in a location other than here where they had good internet quality. We did a cool presentation with Charles Street Video in October. And the performances took place there. They have high bandwidth, so they could get really good quality video for the shows. Whereas if we did it from here it would be sputtering and it would be frustrating. If we record the video, and then play it back in the web meeting, then that's fine. We can do that. So that's our way, our ways around it. Again, it's all kind of adapting to your context, right?

We had also found the need to revamp our events before COVID hit, recognizing that time-based events just don't work up here. Going with an exhibition that runs over a long period of time will attract far more people. And also going with a weekend of performances. So, the same person staying here the weekend, doing kind of on-demand performance, as someone walks in, they do performance, and that was working very, very well for the summer and winter before COVID hit. That's what we had begun to do. And that's probably what we'll end up going back to. But I'm hoping we've got our name in for the Starlink Satellite out where we live. And if that works, we're gonna get it here. And then we'll be able to do virtual at the same time.

They [time-based events] kind of fit in a sense around here in that you come into town—it might just be the nature of South River in that it's kind of a, it's not a hub so much for hanging out, but it is a shopping point. So people come from their various rural places, and then they come in, and they do a kind of a swoop. You know, you might spend the afternoon. You do your groceries, your gas, your post office, and drop into the cafe to have some lunch or whatever. And so that's how we were getting people.

Nadene: There's also a tourist economy here too, right? So we would get more out-of-towners stopping in summer than we would get locals because they'd be at the lake swimming. It's the people coming from the city and renting a cottage looking for things to do. They're the ones that

would be coming in. Even in the wintertime, locals would come in for coffee, they'd see what we're doing. But on the weekend that wouldn't be happening, it would be the snowmobilers or again someone staying for a weekend looking for something to do. So for the locals it's more the drop-in let's see what's happening, have a coffee, check everything out, whereas the art goers are more the tourists

We're finding an interest across the board [local and non-local/virtual and on the ground audiences] to learn. We've run several [combined exhibitions with workshops], I think we're up to three now, maybe it's been four, where we work with an artist who has something, a theme, a text-based score something. And then we have a series of workshops that teach people how to do something, whether it's recording, or learning how to improvise with the text, or whatever. And pieces get recorded. And then there ends up being this community project, the outcome is that there's a listening party at the end, and everybody listens to everybody's work. And that's all virtual. And that's all done with people from around the world. But we did get a large number of Canadian artists participating from different provinces. So it was community building from more of an international level, but also there were people who came for one session just to find out what a text-based score was because they had no idea. And they were an academic from I don't know, California. Sanjay is from Pennsylvania. So it's building an audience for sound and media art in a way, because there just seems to be a lot of interest, but not knowing what it is. And people are willing to hop on for one workshop, because we also had the admission rate was either $10 or free, you could choose.

Darren: It's been challenging to do things locally, online. The internet is awful. I mean, the internet, as you probably experienced, is kind of an inconvenience out here. So unless you have some prior investment in it [sound and media art], there's just not the awareness of it that there is in the city. During COVID we kind of have gone back to an urban audience, inadvertently, except for the outdoors. Being able to do stuff

outdoors, that does attract a lot of local people, because they see it. And so they get curious and they want to check it out. But the virtual stuff is just gone mostly out of their head, and it might be partly our own fault because we put stuff out on Facebook or whatever, and Facebook can sometimes be a closed circuit, you know, and it's the people that already follow you sometimes. So, it might just be the way we handled it, but I think some of it is also just germane to the different level of susceptibility of using the internet.

Nadene: Yeah, I mean, the internet is so bad here, the participation rate for the school kids is quite low. During COVID because the virtual learning required some level of internet and it just cuts out so often that there's just no way to actually have any kind of smooth experience. So it's a very hot topic for our region. Starlink is supposed to be helping a little bit with that. But honestly, it's horrible. It doesn't matter, even Xplornet which is touting 20 megabytes per whatever. They let so many people on that it diminishes to maybe five most of the time during the peak, if you're lucky. I am taking a course online and doing the online exam. I try to use my cell phone to tether and after two hours a cell phone company says, "No, no, you have been on two hours," boots you off and then you have to somehow get your satellite working for five minutes, long enough so that the cell phone will let you back on to tether. It's insane. And in South River proper, you can't get more than five. That's on a Bell line. That's all they offer. They call that 510. But you never get 10.

Sophie: When you were Toronto-based, you had a very connected national and international audience. And you were very embedded in that community. But it sounds like it has shifted to a more local audience. And the broader audience is coming back again because of COVID. Was that shift away from that audience intentional because of the move? Or did that just happen because you moved?

Nadene: There were a number of factors. One factor was that we wanted to build community here. But the other very big factor was it was unattainable to actually have a conference up here, because there is no accommodation. And the fact that we're so far from Toronto, there's no way we could get well, even 30 people.

Darren: I wouldn't say no way [to house 30 people]. But it would require some imaginative thinking. What did work was having workshops for ten people.

Nadene: Yes, workshops can happen, and part of the reason it could happen was because we had Warbler's Roost [their private Airbnb]. So we could block it off and think, Okay, there's room for ten people. Stay there, but there really weren't ten rooms for ten people in town. And this is a conversation we had with Serena [Kataoka, NAISA board member] right from the start. Even in North Bay she had difficulty running any kind of large event that required a lot of accommodation because in the winter when you want to have it a lot of places close. In the summertime, nobody wants to come to a conference because it's sunny and great outside and everybody's got their summer vacation happening. So she warned us right from the start that that would be an issue and the research we did was to run it from afar. The first year we were here we ran the last Toronto International Electroacoustic Symposium (TIES) and that was just so difficult. It was just really spreading us way too thin. So we gave it up in the hopes that someone else would take the reins, and that person that was supposed to have done it didn't, so it's fallen by the wayside.

Darren: Well other things came along that replaced it, but in other places. We were getting a lot of people from the Northeastern US that were coming to our symposia. Other similar types of events emerged over the course of the time, and so those became attractive alternatives to coming to ours. It's possible in the future that we could hold international events again, but it does require very strategic planning.

Nadene: It's a lot of buy-in that you would have to expect from the person attending because after getting on off a plane flying from Europe or wherever, then you're expected to drive three and a half hours to get up here and then stay in a place that may not even be so close to where the events are happening. And to get buy-in from the locals and from even the village for an event like that, there's just not really a lot of understanding.

Darren: It would be a really unique event, like a retreat type event where you're really embedded in nature somewhere and you have a retreat centre. Yeah, it wouldn't happen here. That's the way I could see in this region, doing something [a retreat] but I don't know if you guys did that with your festival [Elemental Festival] on Manitoulin, whether you were doing anything for people travelling. My sense is that up here that would be the way you could deal with it as a kind of summer camp site that has some type of accommodation for 20 or 30 people who stayed around, and that's the whole experience. That that would be the only way I could see it working.

Sophie: It seems that you've amped up outdoor engagements since COVID. You had been doing outdoor programming before, if I remember correctly, and you had the installed, ongoing cafe/gallery work for visitors to the cafe.

Darren: Yeah, even in NAISA's history, even before moving here, we used to do stuff on Toronto Island when we were in Toronto. Yeah, so one of our events took place in the summer on Toronto Island, and that had outdoor performances, had outdoor kind of…we could call them guerrilla-type performances that happened, in different locations. Pop up performances and other ones where we went on a walk and encountered different things along the walk. Then when we were testing the waters up here and doing stuff at Warbler's Roost we kind of took a bit of some of the ideas from way back that we did on Toronto Island—little pieces that were embedded in the woods, specific pieces—

and then took the audience on a bit of a walk around the property to encounter them. We have a big grass area next to us. We had not considered programming there before. But when COVID happened, it became a necessity. And so it's a good location for sound sculptures or things that have some three-dimensional shape to them. Because they become a kind of beacon of interest. NAISA is located close to a highway. There's logging trucks and stuff going by, so certain types of artworks do well here. Others would get lost in the noise.

Sophie: I was curious about how the shift to a rural location, being in a rural village community, has transformed or changed the kind of work that you curate and present, the kind of work that you're making, the artists that you're attracting, and the audience, and how the context has shifted.

Nadene: I don't know that the context has shifted so much because a lot of the things we've done here we had been doing at the Artscape Wychwood Barns. But what we've done here, we just have a larger area and we have more room to breathe. So we have different spaces where we can put on different things. And we have a little more control over the sound. In the beginning, we put on the wrong exhibition. The first thing we put on did not resonate at all with the local community. So I approached Mark Haslam [Ontario Arts Council Media Arts Officer], and said, "Well, you know, from a grants officer point of view, if we were to put on things that were a little bit more accessible, would that be a problem?" And his answer was, "As long as it's current. And as long as it's of good quality, it's not an issue." So what we did was we changed the types of things we were programming, but we made sure that there was always more than one level of understanding. So, for instance, we had the NFB piece, *Biidaaban: First Light*, and the virtual reality piece, and some people would come and they would be like, "Oh, this is so cool." And other people would see and understand the meaning, the deeper kind of story and narrative that was going on. And that's how Darren and I work together on this, he'll come up with something and

I'll say, "Well, does it hit these points?" And it's kind of a group effort, because he'll find pieces, but he'll kind of vet them with me to see, well, is that really going to work for our space or our community? And in some cases, no, but in a lot of cases, they really do. Maybe they need to be tweaked. Like the one piece we're doing this summer has more of a Toronto context. And I said, well, it's great, except why can't the artist make it a South River context? So he did, he changed the text that he was using for the words.

Darren: I think every context does set up certain parameters on what you can do where, even within Toronto, as we moved from different places, stopped doing projects on the island, to doing stuff with the Barns. You work with what's available. The important part is being in the location, knowing it, getting a feeling for its rhythms, and how it speaks to you. So, for instance, we have these logging trucks that come by. We had an artist that created a piece that took the sound from the logging trucks going by and they used it to create musical phrases out of it. Whereas that kind of idea wouldn't have happened at the Barns or on Toronto Island. So I think it's just working with the resources available. It's nice to have that luxury of knowing your context, as opposed to say, being in a place like in Toronto, without a home venue, where you're renting different places, and, you know, you think, well, this would really work in this location, but then it's not available or too costly or something like that. So even though you had what seemed like an endless supply of possible places, they each come with their own characteristics. So knowing your place, and that not changing that much, helps to plan and to get a feeling for what works.

Nadene: And then I think knowing your audience too and being able to market what you're doing and build that into the structure of the event. That helps a lot. I had many conversations with Elizabeth Chitty about that, probably about a year before we went into COVID, just how to bring educational aspects in to make the exhibition the centrepiece of the festival, and then bring everything else—performances,

workshops, whatever—kind of using the exhibition as the hub that everything feeds into so that there's always connections being made, and that you're also factoring in how you're going to reach your audience and how you're going to reach different audiences during the same festival. And that's been something we really had to work hard at. And it was something quite new when we first came here. It was like relearning how to ride a bike because it was the same thing in Toronto when we first started there, discovering that we could get 100 people out to see an exhibition but only five for performance. So let's bring the exhibition to Toronto Island and let's bring the performances to Toronto Island and let all those people get off the ferry and see those performances. And that is exactly what we did…go around the island and just have these crazy, pop-up things happen in the middle of nowhere, and people would gawk and think what the heck is that? Yeah, it takes a lot of understanding of your audience, but I think the context can…we always demand more from the artists that we present than they bargained for. They end up learning something from Darren or something from the context. Artists who come back, who we presented in the past, just know that now, and they build it into what they do. So that's kind of how we've evolved as an organization, I think.

Sophie: It's interesting, because the organization is a very established, respected contemporary media arts organization that's in this rural community which may or may not understand sound art and that culture and what the work is. Like you said, "What is that?" yet being responsive to the community and educating, but at the same time, wanting to be really engaged in this contemporary work and straddling having been a very urban, internationally known organization and now being very local. Do you want to just say a little bit more about navigating those kinds of relationships and the role that you play, both vis-à-vis contemporary sound art and the community?

Nadene: Well, I mean, here's a couple of examples. Michael Waterman did these amazing workshops with kids here, did this outdoor igloo made of ice that melted and had all kinds of contact mics that would make all this lovely sound. There were artists that came from Ottawa to see that piece and heard about it on CBC Radio and wanted to travel the distance to come and check it out. And so on a contemporary level with other artists, there's people that have travelled. Last summer from Toronto, people came up to see our outdoor exhibits and had a coffee and went back, they didn't even stay. So, we're reaching out to those people and we're speaking to them on a level that works, but also, we're providing some way into the artwork that is more on the level to people who don't understand or haven't got any kind of background.

Darren: I think that we've always been that way, even when we were in Toronto, stuff that was happening, particularly in public places, as opposed to in a closed situation of a performance or a hall or gallery. Sound Art doesn't have to be dumbed down to speak to a so-called general or uninformed or first-encounter audience member, if there's different levels in which people can experience something. And so there might be something that's visual about it, or this role, or kinetic, or something else, and then there might be another musical level. Every artwork we present has different kinds of lines of inquiry. I used to think that it had to be interactive. But even when we've had artworks that weren't so interactive, there were other ways of interpreting them or experiencing them that allowed them to still be accessible to somebody that didn't know the field. So in a sense we're trying to present work that appeals really to all levels of familiarity, particularly when it comes to exhibitions. Things like performances or things that already have a limitation for the numbers of people that can attend, then you can afford to preach to the converted a bit more or to look for a more specialized audience. They allow for that. But we don't always, I don't think we've always gone for that, necessarily, unless it was something that was part of a context that allowed us to program work that only really followers of that field would be interested in. So even some of the keynote, or featured artists of the festival or the symposia would be artists that only people in the field would really like.

So, it comes back to the context, allowing certain things to happen. And knowing, we're lucky that our field is very diverse, and we have artists from all backgrounds. It's not just musicians using technology or something like that. That gives us a lot of flexibility for finding a place for something. When we take our works in our call for submissions, there's lots of great works, that when the selection committee evaluates them, they're like, ten out of ten, the highest score. Then we think about can we present this work? It wouldn't work here. Even if we got the extra resources, the ten elephants in the airplane and everything, it still wouldn't work. So the context is everything in that sense, but it doesn't mean that you're doing commercial work or work that experimental people wouldn't like.

Nadene: What we've done too is when we brought Natasha Barrett over, we were able to split the costs of bringing this international artist over from Norway. She does very specific types of performances using ambisonic. And not something that your regular Joe would understand. So what we did was we programmed her as part of an intensive weekend. So three days of attendance. They had accommodation. They came Friday night for the artist's talk, we did a day worth of workshops with Darren and her, and in the evening was a concert by her. And we had a very well-known artist show up for that concert out of the blue. He had called during the week and said, "So, let me get this straight, you are bringing Natasha Barrett to South River?" And we're like, "Yeah." And "She's not performing in Toronto?" "No." And he's like, "Okay," and he literally showed up, five minutes before the concert, he was there. He came from Toronto, he stayed in a motel that night. It was really funny, because, you know, he was fine with coming, because she is somebody that he would travel to see. But we wouldn't have had an audience, if we didn't, there might have been two people from the local area that came to see. Everyone else were participants from the workshop. So we already had our built-in audience.

Darren: Surprisingly, though, I'm always amazed that whatever you put in front of the audience, they will make sense of it on their own terms. I get amazing feedback from people with things that I thought were not working, still someone out there found something in it that was worthwhile for them. Or just another way of looking at it. Sometimes we, especially as Canadians, get a little bit too cautious around what our public will think of us. We're not as bombastic as the neighbours to the south. So that can be to our detriment actually. Sometimes we prevent some possibilities from happening, because we're too self-conscious.

Nadene: But the other thing is to work with what you have. Like Darren's talking specifically about that piece that we had last summer with Bentley Jarvis. We were short because we didn't expect COVID to happen. We didn't expect to do outdoor pieces at all. We approached people and said, "Hey, you know, I remember this piece you did in the tree. Can you do it here in a tree?" And with Bentley, Darren talked to him about the noise factor and how it drives Darren crazy. Bentley worked with that to create something very unique and very interesting. And that's kind of what we really have to do with everything we do here. It's like, well, you can't fight it, you might as well turn it into some sort of artwork. And that's kind of what we've had to do just in general all along. We've been the oddball out as an organization, compared to what other people are doing.

Sophie: I'm just curious if you can speak a bit about how you're engaging and reaching audiences and presenting work now. You seem to be doing a bit of a hybrid presenting between on-site or site-specific and outdoor stuff. How are you reaching folks, and is that different for your rural and your national or international audiences? What platforms are you using?

Nadene: It's different for both. For the local area, it's word of mouth, it's print, it's putting up signs. It's getting in touch with key people, getting your things listed on various event pages. And also on Facebook

there are key people that we know will then post it and we know that it will get to the people in the local area. And that's the way to tackle the local things. In terms of the online, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram is basically it. We do a lot through Akimbo. We found Akimbo arts promotion to be one of the best to reach a large portion of the artists population, both locally and right across Canada, even international, because they have different lists that you can request to put your things on. And we stuck with them. We think it's amazing what they're doing. We do find that we get some promotion through some of the radio stations, Huntsville in particular.

Darren: We produce a radio show as well. In a place called Acra in New York, which is a rural area outside Albany, kind of central New York State. They're very similar to NAISA in some ways, but they're focused on radio and transmission arts, and they run a community radio station there. So they invited us to make a monthly show, which is also available online. It's like a podcast, you can subscribe to it like a podcast. We post the links of those shows every month; those shows are basically profiles of the artists that we're featuring at that time. I mean sometimes it strays from that, but 90% of the time, it's like that. And that helps from a publicity point of view as well. And it helps to build knowledge about the work that we're presenting and the artists that we're presenting because it gives us one hour to learn about them. So that is also useful. There's lots of people in our field that make pieces that we would call fixed media, which is the kind of the audio equivalent of a film. It's studio produced, like a music album. Okay, I guess its equivalence is music. But normally, we would have presented those works with performances with many loudspeakers. But with COVID, of course, we can't. So we've been releasing them on SoundCloud. And SoundCloud itself has its own little audience and people that follow us through that. We're developing a series of videos now that will disseminate through YouTube. All those different contexts have their own little audience, based on people that encounter you through their channels.

Nadene: And what we try to do with all of those things, is always have a local version of that going on. It's a little hard to do that with video right now. But for the summer, we're going to have our MP3 players back at our picnic tables. So people can listen to what we have on SoundCloud. That's a curated series for the summer. And then in the winter we really try to promote each and every track of this SoundCloud album, on Facebook, and feature one a day or every two days. So bringing people to those pieces. Those artworks eventually get them interested in what we're doing as an organization. We have a lot of content from our past festivals or our past conferences and symposia on our website and a lot of articles that have been prepared and are on the website, some are keynote lectures and discussions, roundtable discussions. A lot of our past content is still being utilized. So that's a newer generation of media, artists, and students in the field.

Sophie: It's an interesting hybrid movement between the digital and the site-specific context, and it seems to be amplified with COVID. But you were doing that before in different ways…

Nadene: We decided to call our theme for this year, Digital in Nature. So we have the level meaning that it's digital, in its thinking or in its form. But also, there's that other aspect where you're putting digital things within nature, within the natural context.

Sophie: The theme of our conversation today—context by nature.

Darren: That'll be next year's theme. Context of your content.

What this conversation suggests

Hybridity: As we've observed in other conversations, a thoughtful approach to virtual/digital and on-the-ground/analogue platforms and programming are important for organizations and artists to reach different audiences. In the case of NAISA, virtual programming enabled them to reconnect with an international audience that had previously connected in-person. Similarly, knowing the audiences, particularly within the context of disseminating contemporary, experimental, as well as lesser known, or more technical practices, can inform how to scaffold and layer different entry points for audiences.

Visibility and validity: The local and international reach of NAISA demonstrates that high calibre work and artists engaged in experimental and contemporary practices can find audiences and validation in, and from small, rural communities in Northern Ontario. While NAISA brought its audience with it to South River, their audience was very international, despite programming happening on the ground in Toronto prior to their move north. While NAISA and its curatorial programming is known within contemporary sound art and media circuits, their work and that of other organizations and artists in the region would benefit from expanded visibility that would come from critical writing about artists and arts practices in the region. Funders might consider developing targeted project funding to support exhibition reviews and other critical writing along with new publications and strategies to encourage existing publications to profile northern and rural artists.

Digital infrastructure and geography: As it is with many Northern Ontario communities, broadband connectivity is an issue in South River (despite being a southern Northern Ontario community). Rural organizations and artists must deal with the extra costs (financial and human resources) that physical distances between communities entails—

shipping, equipment rental, travel for exhibitions, training, financial, and other activities. Geography will always be a challenge, and until major infrastructure projects are undertaken to expand internet access in communities, funders might consider these additional costs to northern organizations and artists and provide additional and/or targeted funding to address these issues.

Capacity and the media arts ecosystem: NAISA's capacity to engage audiences and mentor artists and other organizations in the region has a great deal to do with their professional capacity (gained over many years as skilled curators, organizers, and administrators) along with organizational capacity that comes with operating funding from both the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. The importance of institutions of support, like NAISA, and the support of them, cannot be overstated. Many of the artists we spoke with and several arts organizations have benefitted from and been influenced by NAISA's work, opportunities to exhibit, and mentorship from artistic director Darren Copeland. NAISA and other Northern Ontario–based organizations have pointed to a need for nuanced understanding of the unique challenges faced by northern organizations, and have made requests to amend, adapt, and further open operating funding and other programs to both incorporated and unincorporated organizations. Strategic investment in northern media arts organizations to build capacity, professional development and mentorship programs, and explore systems for equipment and other resources sharing would help expand the media arts ecosystem as well as creation and dissemination in the region. Organizations struggle to scale up (into digital programming, with capital projects, and with human resources), and we have noted a range of perceptions and understanding about how to navigate the system, available resources, and the eligibility requirements of various funding programs (project, operating, and capital funds).

MANO is the only media arts ASO that has some reach into the region, but also has limited capacity (with part-time staff). There are

organizations that help with capital projects and builds, but we've learned that existing models don't fit all organizations, all of the time, and in many contexts of the region. Arts councils and funding agencies might explore how to better support organizations in the region through outreach, strategic mentorship programs, targeted ASO and project funding, and addressing gaps and needs in operating programs for both incorporated and unincorporated organizations.

ART FIX OF NIPISSING: LIVED EXPERIENCES WITH DIGITAL + ANALOGUE SPACES

RAyme, GUILT FREE XMAS IN VEGAS (2019). Mixed media, 16 x 20.

ART FIX OF NIPISSING:
LIVED EXPERIENCES WITH DIGITAL + ANALOGUE SPACES

Art Fix of Nipissing is an arts-for-social-change collective that is staffed by, and run for, artists with lived experiences of mental health and substance abuse. It has a unique impact in North Bay as it functions as one of the most accessible sources of art programming and community connection in the region. It upholds a no-exceptions open-door policy and does not require a medical referral. It has a mutually supportive association with White Water Gallery (WWG) in North Bay: WWG adds to Art Fix's administrative capacity and bolsters Art Fix's programming and activities, furthering the flourishing, contributive, arts ecosystem in North Bay (for more about the media arts ecosystem in the region, see here).

Art Fix offers a variety of programming and events and demonstrates considerable innovation in response to social and community contexts and needs. For example, since 2018, it has offered free arts training programs and prior to the onset of COVID in 2020 it offered an annual, juried, exhibition and storytelling event, along with professional development mentorships, as part of North Bay's Mental Health Week. In 2020, however, COVID restrictions impacted the organization's ability to deliver its regular programming, and simultaneously, intensified the need for program continuation and outreach. Art Fix rapidly, and successfully, transitioned from offering on-site programming to offering programs digitally, with outreach for remote access. Their in-person, weekly Open Studio was adapted and relaunched online, and participation in Workman Arts' Scaling Project (2018–21) more than doubled the collective's membership and audience base. In addition, the collective created and launched "May We All Be Well"—an intergenerational public mural project designed to offer a hopeful vision of the future. Through an artist resiliency project, Art Fix is currently

planning to provide smart tablets to community members in order to offset the effects of COVID and address local realities and needs. They anticipate that hybrid and digital/online offerings will continue to play a key role in reaching their communities and informing their strategies as an arts organization. In partnership with MANO, Art Fix recently conducted research to evaluate their digital strategies. This offered a valuable opportunity to identify the impacts on the community and gauge the efficacy of its programming and delivery methods since going online. (Read the Art Fix evaluation report here.)

In fall 2021, Art Fix's Lindsay Sullivan and Rémi Alie met virtually with MANO's Sophie Edwards for a debrief conversation and to reflect together on their research and findings. It also offered a valuable opportunity to connect their work to larger trends and themes in the non-profit arts community. The transcript of this conversation has been lightly edited for clarity.

Sophie: For those less familiar with Art Fix, would you share a brief history of the organization and what a digital pivot has meant to the collective and its work?

Rémi: Art Fix started in 2015. At that point, Serena Kataoka and Amanda Weckwerth were leading the project. Administratively, we've been incubating in White Water Gallery since 2015, considering that we're classified as an art collective, not as a non-profit. They handle a lot of our administrative functions, and there's a really important pass-through relationship. But I'd say it's more than just a pass-through. The North Bay arts community is really flourishing. It's tightly knit and there's a lot of mutual support. Those relationships go beyond the bloodless language of "joint capacity." These are people who are closely linked in a larger project around the arts and around the arts culture in North Bay, which responds really effectively to a strong community demand. For instance, the North Bay Museum is very active, and throws

a really dynamic video game presentation every year. And the Ice Follies is an annual arts event that goes out onto the lake every year [to present public arts programming].

In terms of Art Fix's contribution to that ecosystem, we've traditionally offered a few types of programming. One of the flagship pieces is that we launch one artist every year to the next stage in their career, whether that means helping them assemble their first portfolio or helping them get their first show in Toronto. The outstanding success story is Joe Woods's work, which I believe launched professionally in 2017, after a launch pad show in Toronto that emerged very organically from the community. Joe was selected by the collective to be "the person" that year, and they've gone on to a national-level profile. So that's been a major ongoing contribution that Art Fix has made. And then things changed from a programming and administrative perspective from 2018 to 2021, when we were one of the three scaling sites for Workman Arts' OTF scaling grant, along with Mindful Makers in Thunder Bay and Willow Community in St. Catherine's.

Some useful context is that both of those organizations are non-profits and we're a collective, which reflects really different relationships to administration. Participating in that grant enabled Lindsay's work with Art Fix, and because it was structured around scaling the model that Workman Arts uses, we were able to adapt it to our community. That allowed us to run a robust series of workshops and studio-based art programming over the course of three years. The emphasis here is on studio-based programming, which I think sets the stage for Lindsay to talk about what it meant to go digital last year.

Lindsay: [Prior to our digital transition], we had a weekly Open Studio that folks didn't have to pre-register for. They could just stop by White Water Gallery on Thursdays and participate in their own art project, they could access a wide array of different art supplies. Towards the end,

I remember that someone really wanted to work with clay so we went out and got clay. It was no questions asked, no paperwork, just come. Before this, I was a social worker working in law and mental health at North Bay Regional Health Centre. I got connected with Art Fix because it offered a unique programming experience—it was on a non-clinical basis, and no one had to fill out any paperwork to be part of it.[1] We work with folks who have lived experience and at no time do we ask people to prove what their experience is. From my perspective as a former clinician and healthcare worker, in terms of reintegrating into the community or feeling part of a community, this was a pretty seamless way of saying, "Hey, if you like to make art, you can do this." There are also regular exhibitions, so participants can work on art from wherever they live, and then submit it to the White Water Gallery. You can use your name, or an artist's name. It's up to you.

I've always really admired the autonomy that folks were permitted and joined the organization when the opportunity with the Art Scaling project arose. That brought more art training workshops to the collective, as Rémi said, and a really robust slate of programming. It could easily be a full-time job to administer everything that we offered. And we became super connected with lots of [artists] in the community through our calls for artists and that sort of thing. The way a lot of it worked was that folks would register by coming to the gallery. We would meet each other, they would register for their workshops, and we aimed to make that process easier every season. Of course, who am I to say easier! Of course, stuff happens, and we'd be flexible. But I want to paint the picture that everything happened in person at White Water Gallery, including registration.

Sophie: It was extremely analogue, because even the registration was in person.

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1   This is specifically true for Open Studio. Juried exhibitions and art training programming require the collection of personal information. However, no clinical or personal health information disclosure is required for any programming.

Lindsay: In person, on paper. Can you imagine sharing pens now? It was a different time. Yeah, everything was very much in person, and then COVID hits. We literally found out about COVID's potential during a beading workshop that we were doing at White Water Gallery. So, then we had to shift really, really quickly. And it was an interesting process, because when that shift happened, we paused for a couple of days, as we all did, to ask, "How do we re-evaluate this?"

From March until August, it was very much a process of trying a bunch of different things. Everyone was really committed to coming together—it still warms my heart to this day—to figure out how to get art to folks and still find community in a time of such intense isolation. We tried a bunch of different approaches, and everyone, both the artists and the facilitators, were just incredible. We really developed a community there.

By September we had a sturdier plan, which is why we decided to focus this research on the period from September 20 onwards. What I learned—because I'll never speak for anybody else—was that, although we try our best to be accessible and to create a dialogue with folks to understand what accessibility means to them, I was missing some folks who found that participating from their home was actually more accessible for a variety of reasons. And at the same time, there were some folks who didn't have access to the internet. At the time, it was obvious that so many people were having varying experiences of COVID in ways which were unique to their own circumstances. But, as I'm sure a lot of us were feeling, I realized that our approach was working with some folks, but I was missing others: What the heck do we do here?

At this point, Rémi came on board and we started writing grant applications asking for tools that we thought might be helpful, one of them being smart tablets. That's a project I'm working on right now: uploading art training videos to tablets that people can take with them and work offline. We also started doing Open Studio over Zoom, which we still do every single Thursday and just make art together as best we can.

We were also able to redirect a pocket of funds that I believe had been earmarked for travel and create art kits for folks. We wanted to create a more meaningful experience for folks, whether they were tuning in via Zoom or through a video, so that they had the art supplies they needed or wanted in order to participate. We're going to be creating more art kits with the money that we have leftover right now because we find that it is a very important way to connect with folks. People shared such great things with us, and it's clear that they really appreciated it.

Again, speaking only for myself, the experience of going online felt quite different. I could really feel a shift. We were very analogue, and now we're online. We didn't even have an email mailing list. To me, White Water Gallery felt very much like a drop-in place where people would just come in, grab a cup of coffee, and make art. Evolution and change are integral, and I always welcome that, but there didn't seem to be an immediacy for an email list. For example, if I didn't see folks, I would call them from our phone list. Now it's all of the above—we have folks who we call, and folks on an email list. Hence, we were able to do this research pretty seamlessly. We had contact information prior, but we just changed our way of doing things.

A huge reason why I was excited about this research is that we're a collective, trying our best to ensure that folks know that we want to hear from them. I have no business saying what folks want to do, so this project gave us a chance to touch base and say, "How did it go? We loaned tablets, we went online, and we know that it wasn't the same. How was it?" And further, we connected with folks who didn't participate but who participated previously [in person] at the gallery, asking "What was that shift to digital life like for you?" Because, although I still have organic conversations with folks, you can only

make assumptions. It was nice to have this venue to really ask those questions and get a sense of folks' experience, for ourselves and for our community partners, because everyone's been shifting, looking for things to do, and learning what's meaningful, what worked and didn't. It was a big shift for Art Fix.

Sophie: I'm glad. This is why I wanted to get into this topic, because it speaks to something really interesting that's emerged from our conversations…and we've spoken with more than 175 people, I believe, as part of this massive project. As I'm reflecting, one of the things that's emerged through these conversations is a sense of this hybrid approach. Exactly as you were saying: some people were very digitally embedded or virtual before and have in some ways become more analogue, and vice versa. But one of the meta-narratives that is emerging is that no one's come out to say that there's one right model, or that either digital or analogue is everything. So, what you're saying really speaks to these stories that are coming out.

You've said a little bit about it, but I just want to dig some more into the relevance of the hybrid approach. I think it's particularly interesting in your case, because you said you were so extremely analogue. From the community piece, the connections, the relationships, to your administration and organizing, it was all very analogue. And so now you're forced into this total digital shift. I assume you're going to carry some of this hybridity forward, so I wonder if either of you could speak a little more about the relevance of that approach? I think it goes beyond simply, Yes, it works for some people, and not for others. I know you're only going to speak for yourselves, but reflecting on what people said or communicated in the survey and in your research, why is neither all-digital or all-analogue the answer?

Lindsay: When I read the report, it was fascinating to read what people were actually saying after having been so intensely involved [in Art Fix's programming]. I wasn't surprised, because I think there's a clear

preference for a lot of people to have both: there's a desire to meet with folks in person, but also to have an option to connect online. And although there are the folks who would prefer one or the other, in general it was clear and unsurprising that most folks had a desire for both options.

I think this makes sense. Thinking about depression: from my own lived experience, there are days when I cannot get out of bed, and it's much nicer to have an option. We try to make it clear that folks don't need to have their video on or even use [an artist name/tablet name]. That's something we can offer now that we couldn't do before, and I hadn't even thought of doing before. It's a way for someone to be relatively anonymous and participate in a way that feels right for them. So, I'm not surprised. I think that a lot of folks are wanting to get back together exclusively in person, and we've tried to reconnect in person, but it doesn't work out for a variety of reasons. I would feel as though we were leaving folks behind if we simply returned to the way we did things previously.

So, I think there are some benefits to making these shifts, and to be honest, I feel as though we're able to connect with more folks. But I will say that it weighs heavily on my heart to think about the folks we haven't been able to reconnect with, because we operated on such a drop-in basis. We can't go back, so we've learned lessons that will inform how we move forward. Who knows what the future holds, but it's helpful to understand that we have other ways to exist as a community and stay in better contact with folks, should this happen again.

Sophie: Did the digital Open Studio pick up some of those folks who really valued an in-person Open Studio? Or is it a different group?

Lindsay: It's a different group. We probably didn't get the flow of the Open Studio until winter last year [2020]. And so this summer [2021], we're seeing a pretty regular group of folks coming out. I've

always mentioned that Open Studio is a great way to get to know the collective a little bit before you sign up for a workshop—if you'd like to see some faces and hear our voices, come on out. But we did see a lot of folks who participated with the art training workshops and a lot of folks who were attending before also attend the online workshops, which makes sense because a lot of those folks didn't attend Open Studio.

Sophie: I think the hybrid approach is so important. It's accessible in different ways. It provides accessibility in both the analogue and the digital [spheres] in different ways for different people, at different times, and in different contexts. I'm thinking of everything from internet accessibility to physical accessibility, and the challenges involved in getting to a physical space. So, the pivot has been helpful in some cases, but like you're saying, it also comes down to where you're at that day for folks with lived experience. And further, in terms of approaches to art and art making as artists and being able to work in different spaces.

I don't quite have the words yet, but I suppose each [digital vs. in-person programming] has a different mode, and a different way. Even though there's been a lot of success in transferring workshops and programming to a digital mode, people are still saying that there's something about being in person: in person with other people, with art, experiencing touch and being able to see other people's work and exhibitions. There's a tactile and felt piece.

Lindsay: I think that makes a lot of sense. As we know, there's so much diversity in the ways that folks go about being in the world and the ways that work for them. At Art Fix, it's important to really take note of lessons learned and try to create an ongoing open forum with folks to keep asking, "What worked, and what didn't?" For instance, a feedback form would go out after every single workshop. Of course, we did that with the understanding that a form doesn't always work—I know I feel really anxious to offer feedback if the process doesn't feel super

anonymous. Ultimately, I think that just continuing to evolve and really listening to people is the key.

Rémi: I'd just like to build on Lindsay's point. Without speaking for anyone in particular, if we run with the idea of multiple ways of being in the world, we did see some broad patterns regarding the particular ways of being in the world that spoke to hybrid accessibility. Folks gave a few different reasons for preferring one type of programming delivery over another. Some folks who preferred hybrid delivery, and who were internet users—including people with lived experience— spoke to the fact that it's appealing to have an option to be with others, without getting in your transportation and heading to the studio, when you're having a day. Folks with significant time constraints or caregiving obligations also tended to prefer hybrid programming. In particular, we heard from a number of mothers who said they were able to access hybrid programming, despite childcare obligations. We also heard from artists with mobility challenges and from a number of people who said that it's very physically challenging to get to a studio. And this hybrid programming made it possible to be with others, and to be part of a community, with positive benefits for their health.

With other folks, we found a strong preference for digital but offline programming—here I'm talking about the offline tablets. The folks to whom that option spoke most strongly are people in communal living situations, particularly clinical and carceral situations. Devices which allow access to digital programming without needing to connect to the internet works really well for folks in those contexts. We heard this from our community partners.

People who were not in communal living situations didn't have a strong preference for tablet-based programming that was specifically offline. They primarily told us that they could access the studio or that they had regular internet access which made hybrid programming an appealing option.

Sophie: And would you say there's a particularly defined group for those that prefer analogue in-person, in-studio experiences?

Rémi: That's a really interesting question because there's not a perfect overlap between the folks who were participating in the fully analogue, pre-pandemic version, and the people who have been participating in the hybrid programming that's been offered since last September [2020].

Lindsay has already spoken to the drop-off, and we did our best to accommodate that in our study design. For instance, Lindsay promoted the study on television and radio in addition to social media to try and reach folks who have more analogue communication technologies available to them.

For me, in looking at the qualitative and quantitative responses, the biggest divide was the question of, "Are you in a communal living setting?" That really was the defining variable that made fully offline digital programming very appealing for some people. In fact, the people who advocated most strongly for that form of programming were clinical workers and caseworkers who work with folks in these settings. Out of everyone we spoke to, they were the ones who said that tablets running offline programming would be really impactful. Folks who were participating in hybrid programming wanted to continue to have a hybrid option, and I don't see a pattern there beyond the factors we've already talked about: the folks who really valued the online and hybrid options were people with mobility challenges, time constraints, and childcare obligations.

Sophie: Maybe you can't define them, but I'm interested in the people who weren't necessarily lost, but who also couldn't be reached during this hybrid digital shift. There is definitely a community of people who really need and want analogue programming, who we miss if we try to push towards a fully digital experience.

Lindsay: Definitely, and that was a huge inspiration for our grant writing and the asks we made. To go back to the Ontario Arts Council project I'm currently working on, the programming videos are pre-recorded. Right now, we have maybe a dozen tablets with content that's been uploaded by a video editor. And then there are a number of folks in the community, many of them in community living situations, waiting for a tablet. We're developing a version of a loan program, which of course is also available to individuals who aren't in communal living situations. Again, speaking from my own experience, there's often a shared computer in communal living situations and it can be nice to just bring a tablet to your room.

But like I said, the art supplies are a key part of that equation, because we offer those in person. There's no easy digital solution. But for me, that speaks to ways in which we can make this programming even more meaningful—although some institutions may have a lot of supplies available, other folks may not have any access to supplies. So, those folks are just watching the videos. We've tried to be as creative as possible with upcycling and that sort of thing, for instance, looking at different ways to create watercolours without having watercolours available. We try to focus on that, and while it's not a digital solution, I think it really enhances the digital…

Sophie: Right, almost like "mobile analogue," you've got this blog with the moving materials supported by the digital tablet in the institution. So, we're talking about hospitals, community living, folks who are incarcerated: Are any of them using an Open Studio approach? Say you're giving them the art materials and a tablet with the workshops uploaded, are any of them doing communal studio?

Lindsay: Because Open Studio is open to literally everybody, the way that we send out invites is very public. We wanted to keep that, in the same way that White Water Gallery would have an open door, and people were welcomed on in, with no questions asked. Of course, being

online, we want to be mindful of privacy. For instance, you might see one of those group photos where someone's taken a screenshot of the entire group, and that would normally only happen in Open Studio if someone came in with a camera. So being a little clearer about community agreements and respect to privacy is an extra layer that we've definitely had to consider, especially because privacy can't be guaranteed online.

Sophie: I think for me the question is more precisely, Are people going? Are they taking their mobile materials and your workshops, and then doing an offline studio in the institution together?

Lindsay: I don't know, but I don't think so. And we haven't made our kits for this project yet, so I'm not sure what the plan would be. My hope is that folks use the materials any way they want, so if there are ten people in a group living facility, then we'd try to give them ten kits. And if that's not financially possible, then at least covering some of the bigger items. But when we did this in the fall, everyone had kits to themselves, so that they could participate how they wanted. In the tradition of Open Studio, making a space for folks to make their own art, if they want to, however that feels good for them, and at least be able to access art supplies. But no, I don't know how they [folks in communal living settings] use them.

Sophie: I want to pull on another of these threads, which actually touches on another question. So, there are different experiences. I noticed in the report that there are differing experiences between individuals, but there also seem to be some differing experiences or results, for lack of a better word, between organizations and individuals. Their responses are somewhat different. Do you have some insight into the differences between the organizations and the individuals? I know that question is going to flatten some of the nuances of the report, but I did notice the difference, and I was wondering if you could quickly summarize those differences and offer some insight as to why

organizations and individuals might have had different experiences with that digital pivot.

Rémi: I think the defining differences or reasons are, first, privacy and confidentiality. So, for instance, for clinicians working with folks in clinical settings, video calls raise privacy concerns that an offline tablet doesn't. The other major reason is just the presence of the internet. This is probably one of the more dramatic examples, but our community partner at the North Bay Jail said that the vast majority of the bandwidth is being taken up by remote court appearances right now because, of course, those are now on Zoom. So, they said, "There simply isn't the bandwidth to be running programming online. Tablets are great."

I would say that one of the starkest differences between individuals and organizations is the interest in offline tablets. Individuals, both from the general public and the existing collective, did not tend to be particularly excited about offline programming. Those folks can either go to the studio in person, or they're excited about the flexibility of hybrid programming. Offline digital programming doesn't really meet either of those needs, in terms of social connection or flexibility: it's flexibility without the social connection. Lindsay might want to nuance this insight a bit, but it's different for folks who don't have regular internet access, and for whom the programming might be a more overtly therapeutic activity than a community-based activity. More than anything else, it really seemed to come down to logistics, and what worked for folks in the collective or general community is just not available to folks in communal living situations. That's not to say that it's the next best thing, but it's a modality of delivering programming that works, and can be delivered by a clinician or a community worker, rather than an arts worker.

Sophie: Right. Okay, that's helpful. Did you want to add anything to that, Lindsay? I'm just thinking about your Open Studio. Did the geographical reach change with that as well?

Lindsay: No, not with Open Studio. But we expanded to Thunder Bay during the winter [2020] by joining up with Mindful Makers to do a photography workshop. It just kind of worked out like that: there was a desire expressed to have photography workshops in Thunder Bay, so I called Workman Arts to ask, "Can we do this?"

Actually, this is what inspired it: The artist that we hired for that project, Morningstar Derosiers, moved to the Thunder Bay area from here. And we're supposed to hire local artists, but I'm still "local"—we've just merged. I thought that was really cool and one of the visible benefits of being online [as an organization] is getting connected with other folks, especially from different geographic locations.

I also know that in Sudbury they had also advertised online with Art Fix. It made complete sense that we suddenly had more people from other places interested once we went online, but again, we're used to people physically coming through the front door.

Sophie: I wonder, because when it comes to straight-up art workshops, the geography doesn't really matter, people are joining. Do you think that the distinction [or draw] for remaining more local is because of the lived experience and because it feels more or less safe to join something from another community?

Lindsay: I can definitely appreciate wondering that. But I don't have an answer yet, and honestly, no one's ever talked about it organically.

Sophie: Art Fix is a very local organization. What we're asking is, What role do you play as a local organization in the context of the digital world? Is that a safe space? Is it curating a particular kind

of programming, because of the community or the prison? What I'm trying to get at by asking about your identity as a very local organization is a bit different than the way we've been talking about analogue versus digital—here, I'm talking more about the local versus the digital. What kind of rules do you navigate or bridge between those spaces?

Lindsay: I always joke that if the job with Art Fix had been advertised as it exists now, as "providing digital programming," I would not have gotten the job. There are people out there [who do that]. I was just finishing up a contract, and suddenly had to go online, and I am not savvy with tech. So, it's interesting answering that question from my perspective, because I have no particular expertise in working online. It was all very much a matter of learning as we go. And I love that: it's not that I don't believe that expertise is necessary, but it's just a matter of "keep learning," and it's all going to shift and re-shift. And then, someone's going to say, "How about this way?" and my response is "Let's try."

Again, I love that about Art Fix and the idea of a collective, where folks hopefully know that they are welcome to provide feedback and inform the way that we present [our programming]. When I'm part of these groups and Open Studios, I try to take the first little bit to update folks about what's going on with the collective and offer an opportunity for anyone to give feedback. Even the way that Open Studio operates, I don't decide on the [artmaking] prompt, the collective decides. Another reason that we wanted to do this research project was to say, "Okay, we tried – what do you think?" So at this moment, I would say that, and there are a lot of things popping up in our community.

We still have this couple of hours on the internet every week, where you can still build these connections without anyone asking you clinical questions. I don't document your experience. If a [case]worker is there, they might, but you can just come when you feel like it. It's still a drop-

in, so you don't have to sign up for it at all. It's just kind of there. We're just providing the option. And then with the tablet I've been doing a lot of outreach since April to let people know what's coming. I connect with frontline workers in the community to ensure that they are aware of programming being offered.

Rémi: I'll just share one way [that Art Fix operates in the community]. I went into this research expecting transportation and internet access to be the major barriers to accessibility, and they are for some people, specifically folks in communal settings. We also know that there are people in more remote parts of the broader North Bay region who would like to access programming and who don't have internet access. We're talking about ways to extend that tablet-based programming to folks in more remote parts of the region, but in general, I was a bit surprised. Internet access was not the big issue among our collective and most members of the public that I anticipated. We talk about the so-called "K-shaped recovery," and the biggest barriers to accessibility really tracked larger narratives about accessibility during the pandemic, especially around caregiving. Childcare was more frequently cited as a barrier to accessibility, or as a factor that made hybrid programming really appealing, more so than internet access.

Sophie: I think it's really interesting how Art Fix launches or bridges one artist's practice each year, and the way that you support the person that the collective selects that year. I wonder if you could reflect about that in terms of pre-COVID and the reality of COVID, and with respect to the relationship between the analogue and the digital worlds, because you're talking about the artists travelling to exhibit in Toronto. I think there's probably something there about knowing a person on a local level, in a very analogue way, and supporting their practice, and then making connections with other exhibition spaces, or other people, or the larger cultural community, which I imagine happens partly through digital means. I wonder if you could reflect about that a little and this side of your programming. It's not necessarily a situation where

you would apply for grants and say that you're ready to launch your career, it's something that comes out of your programming, but I think it might speak to those axes where you're crossing over between the local, the analogue, and the digital.

Lindsay: To be fully honest, I thought that COVID was going to be temporary. I thought that going online, learning lessons, and working to understand how to better improve Art Fix's programming, accessibility, and access, was a survival mechanism. But it seems that we're still here, on a Zoom meeting. But we were hoping to get back on track with supporting artists in that way, especially considering how disrupted tours and gallery shows have been. So truthfully, supporting one artist with networking, logistics, and so on hasn't been our focus right now. I honestly didn't anticipate a fourth wave, and we thought we'd be heading back into a space by now. But as COVID does or doesn't resolve, I think we're due for a community meeting with members of Art Fix to just figure out what we do next. Truthfully, although we had lots of plans to continue sponsoring one artist per year, we don't have staff capacity. We're very project based.

Rémi: I'll add something quickly. One of the grants that we were awarded last year was for a media arts project funding professional development for a couple of emerging media artists from the region, who are also being trained as trainers in their own right, so that they can bring that programming capacity back to the region. And as part of that grant, we got some excitement and a commitment from the North Bay Museum to include these artworks in their annual video game history exhibition. Video game arts would be a new direction for them, but it's also a very cool exhibition opportunity, especially considering that it's one of the more popular cultural events in North Bay every year. And during the conversation around that exhibition opportunity, it never crossed anyone's mind to think about delivering that programming in a digital format, or about digital exhibition opportunities. These conversations were happening last November

[2020], and the conversation was very much, "Let's look at the Spring of 2022, when we'll be back open and running this again."

Sophie: Okay, interesting. You've been practicing artists, and you may or may not have tracked this, but do you know how many of your participants, either previously in an analogue context or currently in a hybrid context, identify as artists or as practicing artists?

Lindsay: It's tricky, and I wish we asked that question more succinctly. I think people define the word "artists" in different ways. For example, I didn't call myself an artist, even though I have been my whole life, because I'm a musician and a performance artist. So hearing calling myself "an artist" felt strange to me, but now I am. We've had unofficial conversations where folks have commented, "I'm not an artist," and then other folks have studied art or are returning to it. But we don't have official numbers.

Rémi: We didn't ask anyone a sort of yes or no question. But we did ask people to describe their art practice and 100% of the people who responded described what they *do* artistically, although they might not have explained how they *identified* as artists. A couple of people did offer an artist's name, but everyone described their practices.

Sophie: You mentioned the infrastructure earlier, and I had a question about that. What was the experience of the hybrid [model] on recording the workshops and the programming? What was that experience like for the instructors? And how did you support them in that pivot?

Lindsay: Honestly, the instructors were just absolutely phenomenal. They were all so flexible, recording themselves most of the time. During the winter [2020], we even tried to do several [recordings] in person, and we got to record one instructor in person before we were back in a stay-at-home lockdown, after which folks were asked to submit

their footage. Just navigating this was made so much easier by the experience of working with these artists, facilitators who just seem so dedicated to working with Art Fix. The way that I supported them was very much shaped by my training in community arts facilitation, to just be quite flexible, and to just understand that everyone's pushing the deadline, everyone's having this experience. Now though, it feels so uncomfortable, because those [working practices] are things that we try to avoid. Normally, there's so much beyond our control, and so we just tried to communicate that flexibility to artists and facilitators and stayed super open to any feedback they might have. I'm really curious about that feedback as well, just as much as the feedback from participants. So, as part of the work on the Art Scaling project, we also sent out a feedback form to instructors to gather some of those responses. I'm a talker, so I have a lot of phone conversations, but I also try to be mindful of folks' time. I don't know about you, but it seemed like I had 900 more meetings once COVID hit. We've just been really cognizant of what we're paying the artists for, and we've tried to be really flexible, and to work with artists in ways that don't occupy too much of their highly valued time. Again, being a mental health and arts organization, it's important for our collective to really remember that. Whether they tell you about it or not, I think there's a lot to be said about trying to maintain an environment or a co-working environment that's open to feedback, open to flexibility, in order to be cognizant of other folks' mental health. I don't quite know how to phrase this, but just trying to create a co-working environment that hopefully doesn't add any more pressure in an already uncertain year. We don't try to be perfect, and we don't always hit the mark, but we try to be really receptive to any and all feedback, because it doesn't have to be one way. It can be a million different ways for different folks.

Sophie: I have one other question that's connected to the pilot or to the hybrid [programming], and then I want to spin over some questions about capacity and the organizational structure, which will loop us around to our original conversation. Why do you think it's important

for these programs or this particular program to be directed at the local level, and to be directed by local groups or by a collective?

Lindsay: I'll start by talking about when we were in person. When we talk about building community connections, we really felt that sense of being a collective and a community, and of getting to know artists in the community, and digging really deeply into their practice as well. It's cool that they do this, and it's pretty endless, so I think that having a rolling call for artists and artist facilitators is a good idea. But I will say as well that being online creates opportunities to connect with folks all over the world, really. Just because I'm seeing both the importance of meeting local artists and developing your own art practice in the local community and connecting with those artists. Maybe you want to be part of the Pottery Guild now. Maybe you want to be on the board of directors for Creative Industries. Maybe you found out that you can sell your work at that store down the street, or you find a mentorship opportunity. That's all quite amazing, because we have incredible artists in our region, for sure. But I think online also presents some future opportunities to connect with other folks. I mentioned Thunder Bay, for instance, and it's very cool to see what artists are up to in Thunder Bay and the surrounding area.

Rémi: I'll speak specifically from my experience of working on this project remotely from Toronto. Even more precisely, I would say that the question of local sovereignty is really, really important to me in terms of the programming and priority-setting, and at both a practical and a conceptual level, the questions of Who owns this? Who is this buy-in for? We didn't collect demographic data, that's not what this project was about, but the [Art Fix] population would certainly reflect the broader trends in the community, and we're talking about a broader region that is very Indigenous. Local sovereignty is really important in that context, particularly when working with outside organizations. Lindsay and I very fielded some pointed questions over the course of this study about our intentions, who owned it, what we planned

to do with the data, and what our plans were, both concretely and conceptually. I think that's a huge part of the context. And as a white person working at a distance [from Toronto], those dynamics were very alive for me, very much on my mind.

Sophie: Thanks for that. I think that's important and reflects some other conversations we've been having. I also think it reflects that dynamic between the analogue and the local and the digital, where you can make these connections globally, do workshops, and connect with other artists, mount exhibits and so on, but the direction and the context is coming out of the local and the analogue, in many ways. Perhaps not more so than another organization, but I think that being local is really important to Art Fix. And I think for the people who are joining the group and being part of the collective, that has a different resonance, perhaps, or it's more resonant. But there's something here about controlling the direction of things from the local [level]. I appreciate trying to articulate that, because I'm trying to grasp at these things, and that seems to be coming up in different communities, as well.

This leads to two or three further questions. Part of that connects to your relationship with a larger organization, for instance your work with the Scaling Project as one of the local organizations. So, you have these complex relations between an organization from Toronto, but also as an embedded organization with White Water Gallery. These institutions are a necessary support, but there's also these dynamics of direction and the way that things move along. I'm wondering if you feel able or comfortable to articulate those kinds of dynamics and what it means to have these institutions supporting you. How do you navigate the control in direction and continuity, and how do those allow you to feel like a collective, without spending all your time being a formal non-profit? I'm curious how you grapple with some of those dynamics.

Lindsay: You know, I think White Water Gallery has traditionally had just such a supportive role with Art Fix. I've never attended a board meeting, for example. It always felt like an artist-friend centre supporting this collective. And I had direct [engagement], I used to work from both White Water Gallery and from home, and it was just very welcoming. Art Fix programming was very prominent at White Water Gallery before COVID with workshops and other Art Fix events happening regularly. I feel like we have this autonomy with White Water where they ask, "Cool, how can we support you?" I'm very grateful for that.

I think that our work with Workman Arts definitely helped us explore a little bit more about the organizational structure that works for us—how we present an art training program, for example, even some forms [and processes]. We hadn't thought about these different policies and procedures, so it was helpful to have an opportunity to see what a large-scale mental health and arts program was doing, and having access to that information, both verbally and on paper, and being able to apply our lens to it. We would sit around a table, and talk about "Okay, this language works better for us in our specific communities," because we are not Toronto. Just being able to have access to what this bigger organization was doing, seeing how it fit with us, I really appreciated that flexibility. And that was there from the beginning. They always said, "We understand that you are in North Bay, and we're in Toronto." I was the only staff member with the Scaling Project and for me it was a pilot project in every sense of the word: just learning and growing, what works for us and what doesn't, thinking that something might work and learning that maybe it doesn't. Or vice versa, and just having access to a bigger organization that could give us some feedback. I know that I talked to a couple of their staff members a few times, just sending an email with specific questions about their experience, which was really helpful.

Rémi: This particular side of the equation is something that Lindsay has been so much more present for and has so much more insight. I came on board late last fall [2020] thanks to some available funds though the Workman Arts project. We've talked a little about some of the dynamics that came out of that work, which was all very positive, and came together really well. I only had a brief window into the overall relationship, but I had a great experience working with both organizations. But, in the ways you'd expect, the realities of working in a small, non-incorporated organization in North Bay were just so, so different from the reality of working in a brand-new facility in downtown Toronto.

Lindsay: Yeah. And when I said it was a pilot project in a lot of senses, I had the opportunity to learn about what work could look like. A big one for me is more staff, avoiding one person taking on the roles of several people. In any field, but especially in mental health, we want to make sure that folks aren't overwhelmed and are feeling good about the work they're doing.

Sophie: Well, it seems connected to the bigger question of the validity of a collective and the fact that direction comes from the local level of the organization, regardless of the structure. There are benefits to the flexibility that you have as a collective, and the way that your membership or the participants are engaged in the direction of the collective. That just keys up the importance of direction and ownership coming from that [local level], rather than a host or partnering organization, because when we have these variables of distance and size, we tend to privilege the incorporated, the older, or the larger organizations. But there are benefits to the smaller collectivity, and to make sure that those are prioritized in these relationships.

Lindsay: Yeah, and I should be clear that we actually do have more staff right now because there are more projects happening, keeping us working. But there is a core collective of members, it's highly volunteer–

based, and we meet weekly when we can (summer is always weird) with a core collective of folks who are dedicated to reviewing what's going on with Art Fix. Just to give you an example from the Art Scaling project, I had these checks to balance, and then directives and goals. But when it came to hiring, what we were going to do for hiring, or people submitting their abstracts with plans for art training workshops, I brought that to the collective—there wasn't a process of bringing that sort of thing to Workman Arts for formal approval. So, I think that's a good example of how we made decisions on a very local level about what was going to work for us.

Sophie: We haven't really defined them, but I think it's clear that there are key processes or key approaches in a relationship or a partnership that can make things really work or not work. In terms of capacity, there was the Scaling Project, and the funding was administered by White Water Gallery, but would go through Workman Arts, right? I'm thinking about the bigger picture. Over my 20 or so years working in the arts in the North, there have been so many of these Southern organizations that want to do projects in the North, because we've gone through phases where it was cachet to have a project in the North, to do that checklist, or because the funding model at the time really promoted that kind of project. And so these partnerships became a way to access funding. There have been some good and some not-so-good reasons to seek them out.

I'm not saying that to reflect on this relationship, but we've had this history of outside or Southern organizations doing projects here, getting the funding, and then pulling out when the project's done. And the capacity question isn't addressed, either in the administration or the project. You know, we'll host an organization to come up [to the North]. The number of times I was asked to host things, without funding, and to support a big Toronto [performance] company to come up here and do their thing. It sounds like that's definitely different in this relationship, but we still find these provincial or national

organizations which leave the community once the project's done. Do you have any thoughts about the capacity or how this worked well, or the [administrative and funding] model once it's gone? I know you're trying to get grants, and as you said, Rémi has been able to attract more grants, and you were grant-based before. But I wonder if you have some thoughts about these capacity questions, these relationships, and those kinds of dynamics?

Lindsay: I know I'm a broken record, and just to emphasize that I'm speaking from my perspective, but COVID has been a big issue. We had even more plans for the Scaling Project and then COVID hit. And at that point, the things that grantors and funders were asking for flipped, we went super digital, which is not my expertise, and everything changed. So, I don't know what it would have been like without COVID, for a variety of reasons. I was pleased that we had money we could use to hire Rémi, particularly on a personal note, because we required grants to keep going and my capacity to take on more responsibility was challenged because of the workload I had already. We all have boundaries, and I just said, "No, I can't do this, I can't write grants." But we wanted to keep going. So it was nice to have a pocket of funds to do that. Of course, the grants we were applying to needed to fit the [parameters of the Scaling Project], and there are always those little boxes in bureaucracy.

But I will say that by that point, from my perspective and perhaps because of COVID, I had a clear picture from doing this pilot project of new ways of working that worked for us on a local level and that I couldn't even have anticipated at the beginning of the Scaling Project. So definitely this learning and constant feedback allowed me to say, "Okay, I think I have a pretty good picture now of how something like this could work in our community." That helped better inform the type of grants we're seeking. And I don't know if my knowledge would have been structured in that way without COVID or the Scaling Project.

Rémi: I wish I had some new insight about the capacity question. I think the same old pressures apply, but it's been interesting to me how they've cropped up in new and creative ways in the context of the pandemic and our hybrid programming. For instance, stable access to space is always such a challenge, and such a core component of stable, sustainable programming. And there's ongoing instability in our access to space. We partner with different organizations to triangulate for space, and that was obviously important during the pre-pandemic era, when we were hosting Open Studios and workshops and drop-ins. Having studio space is also really important if you're delivering digital programming, when you need spaces for artists to set up large-scale filming equipment. You need your producer in the room and you need your videographer and editor to be in the space with the artist filming the artwork [training videos] over a four-hour period. You still need space. The reasons are different, but sustainability in both programming and organizational capacities still involves predictable access to space.

Sophie: We've talked about this before, but unfortunately, collectives aren't eligible for operating funding. Even if you were a non-profit, the scale you'd have to grow to in order to be even potentially eligible is a massive hurdle. This is my perspective, but it seems like it would be nice to see some funding for organizations that have a history of providing programming and which provide all kinds of things that a non-profit might, except they don't have the status or the scale for non-profit status or operating funding. I think, both pre-COVID and during the pandemic, presumably, the capacity question in terms of administrative capacity is…

Lindsay: Right, and even running a Zoom where people register online, and then setting up the Zoom keys, it becomes a lot different. Obviously, I do think that COVID really impacted us in many different ways. Especially in the context of an arts and mental health collective I ask myself, "Am I paying attention to my mental health," and just how many hands do I have. For example, we just applied for a grant that we

should be hearing from soon. We asked for two coordinators, in order to split up administration and outreach. That might seem obvious, but we are a small collective. And then, we asked for what we felt was fair compensation for that. We'll see if we get the grant, but I think that it feels good to ask for what we think will work. We do want to grow, and that's reflected in the Scaling Project, the exhibitions, and Open Studio, all these different things that Art Fix has been doing since 2015, and in this research project as well, which is just further evidence we can present to funders that folks overwhelmingly feel as though this program is meaningful and worth funding. Right now, we're just ebbing and flowing with what COVID is presenting us. Writing grants is different [now] too. We're including Plan A and Plan B, right? With the hint that there might be a Plan C. But I do think that just having a clearer picture is what I appreciate about being honest with my capacity and making sure that people are compensated fairly. Artists deserve to get paid.

Sophie: Do you want to give one sentence about why being a collective is a good thing, instead of being a non-profit?

Lindsay: It's tricky to answer because we're always playing with the idea of becoming a non-profit. I can speak to what I enjoy about being part of the collective. We have a goal not to include hierarchy or bureaucracy within what we do as much as possible, to allow a space where folks can give us their feedback and inform what we do in a meaningful way. Their feedback is considered to be what we want to do and it informs what we do and how we do it as Art Fix. And that's continuously evolving. What we're doing this fall may not be what we're doing next fall, or maybe we change ten times over the fall. But we're coming from a place of mutual respect and continuous learning and doing according to what folks are telling us they want.

Rémi: I would love to build off Lindsay's last point. Thinking about the governance structure, I think there are some challenges that get

in the way when moving towards a non-profit structure. And, for the community, I think there are good reasons and real benefits to being a collective. There have been a lot of questions and conversations about the appropriateness of a non-profit structure with a board and CRA reporting. And an executive director is a top-down corporate model that is not especially congruent with the very bottom-up way that this collective works. Effectively, the collective exists by and for the people who belong to it. There's no centralized leader: the members of the collective *are* the board of governors. So there's no language around "the audience that we serve" or "our clients" because the people who run it, and who *are* it, are the people participating. It is its own community. And that's really poorly reflected by top-down governance models that presuppose a separation between leadership and membership.

I've worked in community arts before, and I'm still really struck by the scale of impact, especially relative to capacity. Art Fix runs on a mid–five figure budget, and it's the only organization in North Bay that offers mental wellness services without a doctor's referral. I have to say, this environmental scan that we put together is the only data on mental wellness in the community that has been assembled since 2006. I believe that's the last time there was a report, and so the numbers that we produced are going to the mayor's office. These are "the numbers" for the North Bay region. The extent of the data poverty left by government organizations, which also require data to release funding, is breathtaking to me. The fact that this project, pulled together by two part-time employees, has produced *the* mental wellness data for the region is a breathtaking failure of the government to me. And it speaks to an extraordinary gap between capacity and impact.

Lindsay: Just to echo Rémi's point, I feel like this is really important information. I completed my Master's in Community Music two years ago and found it really difficult to find local data associated with mental health in the arts or wellness in the arts. And I just really feel as though this is credit to the folks that filled it out, right? This is really

insightful and important information that I think will really impact our community in a great way and remind our community that these artists exist despite the odds, you know, moving onwards online. As someone with lived experience to fight every single day, I just think this is something that will be really well received in our community and start a lot more conversations, including how we do it again.

Sophie: Yeah. We really didn't touch on this, but I think this raises something else in terms of the impact. It's subtler and harder to quantify, but I think we know intuitively that there are these ecosystems or clusters that happen when you have mutually supporting organizations, and then you're supporting artists to build their practices, and that goes out. There are a number of things that need to happen to support this flow: there needs to be the capacity, and the support, and the funding. But there's also institutions of support. So, you have White Water Gallery supporting you, you have Rémi, there's all these different things, and then it goes out. But we definitely see that even in much smaller communities, and there's the mentorship piece that happens, the training, all these kinds of things that you're contributing in ways that I think are hard to interview people for or to find a statistic which says that. I think we're seeing that where we have these clusters, it influences the animation that happens in the community. And I think North Bay is a great example of that, in the work you're doing, and the other arts organizations and artists in the community.

Lindsay: I also think about all of the long-form answers that were included in the report, which I really think speak to the ways that folks find meaning within this. So, it's great to know who wants to use a tablet and who doesn't, and expanding on that is actually quite powerful. You know, I obviously work with these folks, so I was emotional reading it back, because you don't always know. And I do really think that an important part of really hearing what folks are saying is to give them space to write freely, and then including it. To me, that just speaks to how we make this about something other than

tokenism. Okay, we filled the gap, we gave you a tablet or whatever—what does that mean? What is that going to mean? And is it meaningful?

What this conversation suggests

Hybridity: As we've highlighted elsewhere in this report, Art Fix, like other organizations, has found that while the digital is ubiquitous and has created many opportunities to reach different audiences and adapt local and analogue programming, digital practices do not reach all audiences all of the time. In addition, there are particular sets of relations and complexities for artists with lived experiences of mental health and addictions.

Capacity: Pivoting to digital forums and forms requires careful thought in terms of formats and approaches. Similarly, transitioning to digital platforms and an online presence isn't a reproduction of existing programs in an online fashion. Programs must be carefully re/designed, facilitated, and filmed and reproduced with an eye for quality and accessibility. Digital pivots require additional creative, technical, and coordination skills. As Art Fix and other organizations adopt hybrid forms, their capacity to deliver high-quality programming using analogue methods and digital platforms becomes an issue. These programming complexities and capacity issues highlight pre-existing and entrenched issues that ad hoc collectives face. There is a need for resources such as funding and technical, administrative and creative skill sharing to support digital and hybrid programming. Funding agencies need to examine ways to support established collectives without requiring the scaling up and formalization typically required for operational funding.

Collaborations and nesting: Art Fix's administrative relationship with White Water Gallery (North Bay) and the scaling project with Workman Arts (Toronto) has enabled them to have a degree of stability and administrative capacity. However, in the long term, there are significant questions to grapple with regarding organizational structure and eligibility for funding. As a northern group, however, they find there is a certain element of translation that occurs between their experience and funding program criteria, and between them and established, incorporated organizations, particularly those from Southern Ontario that may or may not understand the complexities of the organization, their methods of delivering programs, and the region and their membership. The North, in its collaborations with the South, have often had the responsibility of managing the relationships and helping southern organizations navigate the complexities, but without the benefit of increased capacity. In the case of Art Fix and Mindful Makers (two of the Workman Arts Scaling Project sites), there is a need for new sources of funding to support their capacity at the end of the project.

SAFE + ACCESSIBLE SPACES IN DIGITAL PRACTICES

1) Michel Dumont, *Atlas Struggling With Covid19* (2020). Packing tape and mirrors. Photo: Dave Zahondnik.
2) Kim Kitchen, *Rolling Kate Pace Way* (2020). Photograph by Kim Kitchen with Meredith Buckley.

SAFE + ACCESSIBLE SPACES IN DIGITAL PRACTICES

This last year, the pandemic has been challenging for many artists. Disabled artists have already been working within confines, can't afford studio space, lack of supplies, etc. We are ideally suited for this. My experience as a gay man surviving the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s has prepared me for this. It's been my raison d'être: I had to take my pain and make it into art. I had help on the drafts [of a *Canadian Art* article] from my sister and my friend, Mariano. We had fun. Disabled artists frequently have to collaborate. It takes a village sometimes. I love that I was able to collaborate and create something cool that people wanted to read. Many able-bodied artists had a hard time adapting to the new realities of isolation but being disabled can be an isolating experience with communication and mobility issues. Social lives of disabled artists are frequently insular. We work within those limitations. I did have a Pride show cancelled in Vancouver, but another Pride show went virtual, and I was able to work on a Pride photoshoot. Those photos were part of the online show. Nuit Blanche was also cancelled, but new opportunities popped up. Every other year, I have ten shows on my CV, but in 2020, I had 20 shows. Way more work. The skills I gained in a lifetime all became relevant in one fell swoop. My sister said, "Covid is breaking your way, Michel."
—Michel Dumont, *Two-Spirit artist, Thunder Bay/Lake Helen First Nation*

We need to hear the voices of those who are the most in need, who have the ability to inspire change. If the norm of accessibility and digital infrastructure was based around this alone, placing the expectations of matching that process to the able-bodied THEN we would have equitable access.
—Kim Kitchen, *multidisciplinary artist, North Bay*

Throughout many of the conversations held across the region, artists spoke about their lived experiences with disability and mental health. In addition to conversation circles, Art Fix of Nipissing conducted interviews with their membership to hear how, or if, their adoption of online programming platforms impacted participants. (For more about Art Fix and their program, see here and here.)

All of these conversations revealed a range of complexities and challenges. One outcome that they exposed is that work needs to be approached differently and that abilities to do so are varied. For instance, some artists have learned from their lived experiences to maneuver past obstacles and adapt to unexpected circumstances, such as the COVID pandemic. Their ability to do so stems from having encountered similar conditions or effects, such as social isolation and/or barriers to accessing certain services and connections, pre-pandemic. Other artists without these experiences might not have adapted as well.

> Digital infrastructure allows me to create art as a form of access to tell and share my story(s). My experience as a disabled artist has evolved because I now have what feels like unlimited opportunity to attend events, gallery openings, art making, and other online activities from the comfort of my home. This has made attending possible. Ironically, one positive result of the COVID pandemic is that this digital connectivity has produced/made possible inclusive components, such as access, viability, and sustainability. However, to sustain that momentum ongoing work in this area is a must, and means advocacy, continuous attention to ways of reaching out, listening, and taking action to transform spaces and remove barriers. —Kim Kitchen

> In terms of health/wellness, it's been a lifelong journey and I go through different periods where I can be in the world in a strong, leadership way, and other times I have to focus on taking

care of myself. There's a cumulative, lifetime cost and benefit in having to struggle with mental illness. It's contributed greatly to my ability to work with people and do my own creative work. Difficulty has come from me having to take care of my mental health where I can't be in fixed job settings long term, and I'm paying the price for that now. It's been very difficult in the last two years, but I think I have to honour the way I've continued to choose to take care of myself. I wish there was a guaranteed annual income all of those years. I didn't want to go on disability because my philosophy is strengths-based and it felt like too much of a loss in terms of how I wanted to operate in the world. Maybe it's just my own fear but the word "disability" does have stigma attached to it. It's been a tight squeeze for most of my life. I survived it, but it wasn't kind to me, ultimately. I'm struggling now with questioning my choices. I gave all my energy into doing it well. Maybe COVID has exacerbated everything. —Eleanor, *Thunder Bay*

Digital platforms offer artists the chance to participate in a variety of conversations and artistic communities; it offers artists opportunities that may otherwise be challenging to access. Yet, learning to use technology can be difficult and take time; for example, Kim Kitchen notes that she struggles to keep up with typing and needs talk-to-text software. Sometimes she doesn't know who to turn to for support. She notes that there are individuals who could help, but there needs to be more of a resource for artists with disabilities in the North. Without support to keep up technically, she acknowledges that it is difficult for her to work at her potential. Others acknowledged that the digital pivot had increased access, but additional stressors, such as limited capacity to remain on long remote meeting platforms, challenges to assimilate large amounts of information and numbers of people in online platforms, and a reduced sense of safety, became part of this new form of access. Creating digital platforms and enabling access requires nuanced considerations of each person's capacity, needs, and approaches; it is complex because the needs and considerations can be diverse and the resources to address them can be variable and/or geographically distant.

Confidentiality is a concern when working remotely/digitally. Websites, forms, video calls, content can look secure but the user as well as the creator cannot promise confidentiality in the same manner as face-to-face interactions. Screenshots can capture anything shared on a screen, a second device can record, hacking can occur, etc. Confidentiality and trust in an integral aspect to work equitably and is something that, at this point, cannot be secured. How can we create safe spaces or provide confidentiality if we cannot consistently or adequately secure privacy?
—Emily Couchie, *expressive arts facilitator, Nipissing First Nation*

A lot of us artists...sometimes I'm shy. I don't like to put my business out there. My art has taken me to dark and light places. We need a safe space like this convo, as long as you're not using my name and it's confidential. A space of belonging and confidentiality. Kids, elders, any age group, we have to give a sense of belonging. A lot of artists don't like to come out in the open. Some are shy, need a sense of belonging, confidentiality, we don't want to be out there. Sometimes we gotta be out there, some of us have to sell our art to survive. —Anonymous

I don't know how you properly inform people and get them to agree to the consensual terms of that [digital] space to create a safe space where people feel welcome and invited to participate. —Ashley Whyte, *multi-media artist, Gore Bay, Manitoulin Island*

Many artists do not self-identify, or publicly identify, as disabled or as living with experiences of mental health. This has made it challenging for artists to find each other, provide mutual support and potentially collaborate. Kim Kitchen, for instance, noted that she'd like to connect

with other disabled artists and experience virtual studio visits to learn how others are working and managing, how they move in their spaces, or how they have adapted their practices and work within their disabilities. Artists with lived experience of mental health challenges or disabilities need resources and advocacy support. And while artists like Kim have tried to advocate and be a voice for artists, this work requires additional capacity and support which isn't always available. Like media arts organizations that try to address infrastructure gaps, in addition to what their mandate actually covers, individual artists are trying to fill substantial gaps in advocacy and organizing for disabled artists.

One artist noted that the language of disability is complex; just as some artists do not self-identify, some artists use the word disability in different ways, and in different contexts:

> I also would like to note that I usually only use the words disability and disabled when referring to myself for the purpose of communicating with medical staff, educators, government employees, etc. I don't like the word disabled. I truly believe that I am gifted, my differences are a gift that I am learning how to use on a daily, lifelong basis. We are all different and we all have different strengths and areas that require growth. To call myself disabled feels like I'm saying that I am "less than," when in truth I am more than good enough, smart enough, talented enough, and human enough. Using labels like mental illness, disability, and the like are an unfortunate means to an end that are necessary to access supports. This also needs to change.
> —Sacha Mayo, *Thunder Bay*

In a positive way, arts councils and their juries want to see that artists are paid fairly for their work. Years of advocacy by Canadian Artists' Representation/Le Front des artistes canadiens (CARFAC) and other groups helped to establish minimum fee schedules. More recently, advocates were able to change the regulations relating to disability

payments so that artists that received grants did not lose their provincial disability support. While this is a beneficial result of advocacy, there are some individuals who do not fit the criteria, such as Jimmie Chivarelli, the Artistic Director of Shadows of the Mind Film Festival (which is dedicated to screening films that "bring mental health, addictions and social issues to light").

Jimmie is an emerging filmmaker who receives benefits through a federal disability program. Any artist fees he receives would potentially put his benefit at risk. Therefore, when he applies for grants, he doesn't include an artist fee in the budget; unless the artist provides an explanation, this omission can be looked upon unfavorably by juries. It's only recently, and through these research circles, that Jimmie has openly divulged his "status." He struggles to navigate the production of his own work within the parameters of disability, and the funding system itself is a significant obstacle to the completion of his projects and fair payment for their production.

The financial challenges faced by disabled artists, and the complex negotiations between artistic practice, the funding system, and various physical, structural, and cultural constraints, adds layers of complexity and burden:

> He's not an attentive partner. We are going to try couples counselling again. Things are not stable in my personal life, and COVID has shone a big headlight on it, so that has affected my relationship at home, and my ability to make art. My other income was cut in half due to a new clause in my contract at work. Because of allergies, I wouldn't take vaccinations [not COVID] and it contains things that I react to, so I couldn't renew my contract. So I went into the Master's Program. My partner said not to worry about contributing to the bills. He is very generous about money. It was a risk for me to become dependent on someone because I've never had to do that, and

now I'm not in a financial position to live alone unless I had help. I feel constrained in my own decision-making because I'm lacking resources. I'm almost to retirement age, and I don't want to go through hoops for ODSP because the process is so brutally demoralizing. I'll be getting my CPP before that would even work out. This affects my ability to feel at peace and thus my ability to make art. —Anonymous

The gaps in the funding, and the arts system generally, force some to make difficult financial and personal choices to support and sustain their art practice and manage their daily lives. However, artists with physical and mental health challenges are also placed in vulnerable and precarious positions because their options often do not enable complete self-sufficiency: financially they are dependent on disability benefits, or on family, partners, or others, and those relationships can be complex, capricious, or toxic. These outcomes negatively affect the artists' capacity to conceptualize and produce work. It can also impact their ability to manage the disability itself.

Jimmie Chiverelli finds it very difficult to make films the way other filmmakers might; he's not necessarily able to work or know that he'll be able to work over long stretches of time. His state of mind might shift. He adapts his practice for what is manageable for him, such as building in extra time for all projects. These necessary elements, however, means that work emerges slowly—producing even a short film takes a long time. These adaptations and different abilities are common:

> [After a brain injury,] I find it difficult to do things that have a sequence to them. I used to get really stressed because as soon as someone said the second thing, I was still processing the first. —Anonymous

Jimmie started a collaboration with filmmaker Zack Trunzo, who understands Jimmie's style of working. Jimmie's projects, however, depend on Zack's availability, as he works full time—they are able to make a short film together every year or two. Jimmie's participation in the Sault Ste. Marie film circle conversation (read about it here), however, and his willingness to disclose his experiences, has led him to consider how he might connect with other resources in the community. His interest in collaborative approaches to making art echoes the experience of Kim Kitchen, an artist from North Bay, who has had to make similar choices. After rheumatoid arthritis completely changed her life, she radically transformed her artistic practice to focus on sound and video media. She realized she needed a much more collaborative approach to making art; this proved very beneficial to her own work, as well as her sense of community and connection.

Working as a solo artist is often both the norm and the necessity when living in geographically dispersed communities, but isn't always ideal, as both Kim and Jimmie demonstrate, and can result in the isolation of artists as each tries to establish and maintain an advantage over others working in a similar field.

Social media and digital platforms have assisted artists to make connections and develop artistic relationships. Artists who are unable to access consistent and equal funding, as well as funding opportunities, partnerships, and investment in a variety of scaffolded supports, are increasingly exploring (if they have the capacity) digital options to monetize their work and establish a following. Collaborations, cross-pollinations, co/mentorships, and other exchanges are integral to the development of the media arts in the region, and, for artists with a variety of challenges that emerge from their lived experiences, collaborations and broader community support are perhaps even more important.

Context for me, then, is about the bigger picture of society not supporting artists. There's a price to pay. And who's paying it? Artists create work that benefits society. There's no reason we shouldn't be paid well. As women, we bear the load of family first, but that's undervalued in society too. All of these elements…and I can't even get a basic income. What's wrong with this picture? If you mix in mental illness, wow, that soup is already hard to swim in. We need advocating for the artists, support and true community, not popularity. —Eleanor

Support is necessary for someone with family responsibilities [Sacha is raising two kids as a solo parent]. Poverty impacts access to participation, in terms of classes, getting supplies, being part of community sales. The positive part of being poor and disabled is that it forces you to be creative and come up with ideas using what is available. Barriers can be amazing opportunities, but we have enough of them. —Sacha Mayo

Stacey Hare Hodgins facilitated a number of conversations in Thunder Bay. One artist spoke about challenges at home that makes the artist vulnerable in terms of personal and financial independence. The artist notes that there is a risk involved in being dependent on another person or on a regular economic source, such as a disability payment.

> I think this [gender and disability] is really important though. There are a lot of women artists that are financially dependent, and it needs to be addressed. As a person with multiple disabilities that provide multiple barriers to employment, I think it's [important] to put it in a public discussion. —Anonymous

My challenges are creating time and space to get it done. It's difficult when other people are home and on Zoom [since the pandemic closed the open studios and other spaces]. It's a small house. It involves a lot of planning, even planning who can answer the phone, for instance. I have to float to whatever space I can create in, like the edge of my bed. What matters most is space, privacy, and the time to stay focused. —ElizaBeth Hill, *singer-songwriter and multidisciplinary artist, Mohawk from the Six Nations of the Grand River Territory, Thunder Bay*

These issues might not seem directly related to research about digital strategies, but they do intersect with discussions about community control and access. The complexities of lived experiences inform how, where, when, and if an artist can participate equitably, safely, and consistently in both analogue and digital platforms and alongside all artists; when they can't, their ability to develop professional portfolios and build their practices can be that much more difficult than other artists. The ability of a disabled artist to be artistically active differs widely and is based on their day-to-day experiences and ability to access resources. These, and other, factors can make it even more difficult to build the kind of curriculum vitae and presence that an artist needs to demonstrate status as a professional.

> I would like to have a stable lifestyle where I could feel at peace and allow art to emerge. I feel pretty emotionally and socially guarded so there isn't a lot of flow happening. If I could create the context in my personal life to allow that creative flow to happen, the next important thing would be to show my work, to transition to online. —Anonymous

Going into an existing space to make art isn't comfortable for me. I attend the classes to gain skills and to network, but I go home to make the art. I need a space that's private. —Anonymous

Mindful Makers Collective, a collaborative group, feels like an important first step. Wouldn't it be awesome if we had a facility

where we could book private studio space, borrow equipment, and have shows? A fully accommodating space that could also offer more marketing for people like us. We need to be in all the galleries, not just the ones for artists with mental illness. We should be in mainstream shows, not just shows for disabled artists. We need to be accepted as true professional artists, and not defined only by our disabilities. No more shame. We need less shame around madness. Before Mindful Makers Collective, there wasn't a place for people like me to go and create and be part of exhibitions and take workshops. We are isolated in Northwestern Ontario. There are less opportunities and fewer centres. It's not just socioeconomic barriers.

—Anonymous

What these conversations suggest:

Digital strategies: Digital platforms, technologies, and tools, through access to broadband and the internet, have enabled many artists to adapt their practices and participate more equitably across conventional forms of dissemination and relationship building such as gallery exhibitions, artist talks, conferences, mentoring, and collaborations. However, simply creating access to these tools does not address the nuanced and varying needs that emerge from the internet infrastructure. These include the capacity to use the tools (and know where to find them), the ability to endure long digital and virtual engagements, online facilitation, safety, confidentiality, and other issues. As we've seen throughout the report, one model, or a single strategy, cannot address all artists or all communities.

Hybridity: The changing and diverse needs of deaf and disabled artists requires funders to be flexible and accommodating. There is a need to activate both digital and on-the-ground/in-person spaces, both of which require different kinds of access, technology, and skills. Working in different spaces and at different scales is necessary to navigate lived experiences as artists and to engage within a complex arts ecosystem that is active at a range of levels. Similarly, no single model works for all artists at all times.

Institutions of support: Marginalized artists, disabled artists, and artists with lived experience of mental health and addiction are affected by galleries, curators, ad hoc and established organizations, and other groups involved in fostering a strong digital arts ecosystem. Targeted support from ASOs, funders, and other agencies could help artists build their capacity and participate fully as media artists. This would close some of the current holes not addressed by institutions of support.

Specific strategies and considerations noted by artists:

- **Resources**: Develop resources for deaf and disabled artists and artists with lived experience, such as supported mentors/advocates/supporters. Ideally, artists and cultural workers with lived experience of mental health and addiction could help artists navigate technology, funding programs, and other technical, creative, and administrative elements. Pilot funding might assess the approaches and impact of strategic resources.

- **Funding and funder flexibility and support**: Increase funder outreach and supports for artists with lived experience of mental health and addiction. One artist noted the flexibility of the Deaf and Disabled funding program at the Ontario Arts Council (OAC), and encouraged funders to integrate flexibility into deadlines, application processes, eligible activities, and changes in activities over the time of a grant to reflect the changing and diverse needs of deaf and disabled artists. It was noted that the funding programs and outreach at the OAC was diminished as a result of the 2018 cuts to the OAC by the Ford government; additional funding for these funding streams and outreach teams are necessary to provide equitable funding for deaf and disabled artists and artists with lived experience of mental health and addiction.

FILM, TELEVISION, + GAME PRODUCTION IN NORTHERN ONTARIO:
A VIEW OF THE FIELD

Zach on Welding Shoot (2018). Photo: Zachary Cassidy, Casa di Media Productions (Timmins).

FILM, TELEVISION, + GAME PRODUCTION IN NORTHERN ONTARIO: A VIEW OF THE FIELD

"Completely by accident. And that's the truth." That's how Lieann Koivukoski got involved in film and television in 2008. At the time, Lieann was Executive Director of the Near North Mobile Media Lab (n2m2l):

> For me, it was the city calling me when Paul Stevens and Eric Jordan came with Oliver Sherman and wanted to work with somebody to bring their film to North Bay. The city called me and I'm like, "I run a…it's not what you think it is…I'm teaching kids how to make videos. That's what I'm doing." But it was an experience. —Lieann Koivukoski, *Post Production North, North Bay*

It is now 13 years later and dozens and dozens of films and television episodes, supplemented by millions in investment, have been shot in Northern Ontario. These investments have had positive benefits in terms of creating local jobs and impacting other sectors. The Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation (NOHFC), for example, which is a significant support to media arts projects in Northern Ontario, cites their direct investment and leverage, since 2018, as supporting "more than $318 million in 3,134 projects in Northern Ontario, leveraging more than $1.3 billion in investment and creating or sustaining 4,850 jobs."[1]

For North Bay, and northern film production in general, Lieann's conversation with Oliver Sherman in 2008 was the beginning of her involvement in the industry.

> 2008. Yeah. The big first film happened in North Bay. Before that the first film that was made was by Bill Plumstead [*That Beautiful*

Somewhere, 2006]. There was one other movie before that in the 1950s. Oliver Sherman was the beginning for us. You know, it was just this crazy show that happened. And then after that it was one right after the other. And it flows between communities too.
—Lieann Koivukoski

Since 2008, film and television production in Northern Ontario has grown significantly, notably in Sudbury, North Bay, and Sault Ste. Marie, but also in Parry Sound, Timmins, and Thunder Bay. Lieann's company, Post Production North, is an established part of the industry, and there are now studios in several cities, such as Rolling Pictures in Sault Ste. Marie.[2]

> Rolling Pictures will be launching a corporate production unit in its Sault office. We have already added staff and equipment and currently have contracts with the Chamber of Commerce, Sault Ste. Marie Police, and several private and public businesses and organizations. There was a real need in the Soo for quality services in this area.
>
> One of the areas of expansion being pursued by Rolling Pictures in Sault Ste. Marie is in audio mixing, special effects, and animation. Talks are underway with Sault College to offer programs to help attract talent in these fields. Both local and foreign students have played an important role in the growth of Rolling Pictures in the North, and will continue to do so.
> —Robert Peace, *Director, Community and Government Relations, Rolling Pictures, Sault Ste. Marie*

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1   See https://nohfc.ca/en/pages/success-stories/our-impact.

2   The Sault Ste. Marie, North Bay, and Sudbury film offices report the following, respectively: 32 feature films, 12 television series, 2 documentaries, and 2 web series as of 2019; 17 productions in 2021 alone, with $31 million economic impact; 85 film and television productions between 2015 and 2019 with $127 million in local spending. The City of Thunder Bay has recorded 20 productions (features, music videos, television episodes and documentaries) shot in the area, two of which were written and/or directed by the Thunder Bay–based Anishinaabekwe filmmaker Michelle Derosiers.

The ubiquity and accessibility of digital media has been pivotal to the rise of film and television in the North. Geographical distances are too broad and inefficient for many aspects of the industry, such as processing analogue film or producing viable and timely dailies. David Weiwel, who opened Cafe Obscura in 2019 a few months prior to the pandemic, is one of a handful of photographers who continues to use analogue formats. His cafe and shop has its own dark room and a dedicated following of inveterate analogue lovers. While analogue has its place in the hands and hearts of artists, digital technology, digital infrastructure, and high-speed broadband play central and crucial roles in the development and possibilities of northern film and television production.

However, the film ecosystem and its endurance as a sector are influenced by a number of other factors: the rise and facility of remote post-production; the relatively short driving distance from Toronto to North Bay (3.5 hours) or to Sudbury (4.5 hours) and reliable air transportation to places like Thunder Bay; and perhaps most significantly, the investments in the industry by the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation (NOHFC).

> The investments the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation has made in our growing film and television industry have helped to create a virtuous circle. By attracting productions to the North, we've built a talented crew base, essential infrastructure, including a full-service studio and equipment houses, and support services such as hair and make-up, carpentry, and catering. These, in turn, helped lure a record number of productions to Northern Ontario.
> —Patrick O'Hearn, *Associate Managing Director, Cultural Industries Ontario North, Sudbury*[3]

While the pandemic has disrupted or slowed many aspects of the industry, there are some areas of unexpected productivity or growth. Lieann Koivukoski has been receiving a record number of applications from skilled techies wanting to leave the cities. Sudbury-based producer Jason Gervais used the Toronto Raptors jet to fly a crew of 60 people to the Cayman Islands in order to shoot a number of films over six months. Hallmark, headquartered in California, produces more projects in Northern Ontario than any other production company. In fact, in order to serve the company's summer production schedules, North Bay kept its Christmas lights up all year for a period of time. Small towns, notably Wawa and Powassan, have been used as locations for shoots. Horror films are regularly shot and produced, along with outdoor shows like *The Amazing Race* (Thunder Bay) and *Fuel the Fire TV* (M'Chigeeng First Nation). Northern Ontario has also seen the production of a number of successful shows including *Cardinal, Carter*, and *Still Mine* (North Bay) and *Letterkenny* and *X-Men* (Sudbury). Amazon and Netflix have begun filming in North Bay and Sudbury, and a number of other big production companies, such as Red Sky and Rolling Pictures have opened offices in North Bay, Sudbury, and Sault Ste. Marie, among other locations. Spin-off businesses have emerged to support the sector—local entrepreneurs provide driving services, catering, craft and other production support, and northern crews are now sought after for productions elsewhere in Canada. Northern Ontario has become a viable and attractive film production centre. As the NOHFC website states:

> In March 2016, Crave TV, together with the Comedy Network, announced it was ordering a second season of the smash hit series *Letterkenny*. Shot in Sudbury, it's produced by Toronto-based New Metric Media. Why did the company choose Sudbury? "It was a no brainer," says executive producer Mark Montefiore, whose first project in the northern city was 2012's *Cas & Dylan*, a feature film starring Academy Award winner Richard Dreyfuss and directed by Jason Priestly. "That experience showed me that Sudbury could give us all the

3   https://nohfc.ca/en/success_stories/hit-canadian-tv-series-shot-in-sudbury.

landscapes we needed, experienced technical and support people, and critical funding through the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation."[4]

While the influx of production companies and films in the North demonstrates its attractiveness to companies outside the region, Northern Ontario has its own production companies and filmmakers. Critically acclaimed films by regional talent, written and/or produced, in large part, by Indigenous women, have included work by Darlene Naponse, Michele Derosier and Shirley Cheechoo. In 2002, Cheechoo founded Weengushk Film Institute and, in 2018, was honoured with the Order of Canada. In 2019, Naponse's *Falls Around Her* travelled to film festivals worldwide, and she received a Lifetime Achievement Award at the Northern Ontario Music and Film Awards. Important and influential work by independent documentary filmmakers, media artists, and performance artists (while lesser known and made with smaller grants) contribute to critical conversations about place, identity, and contemporary arts practices. Strong examples include the work of Tanya Lukin Linklater, Victoria Anderson Gardener, Morningstar Derosier, and Nadine Arpin—all of whom are Indigenous women.

Several schools, including Sault College (Sault Ste. Marie), Canadore College (North Bay), Confederation College (Thunder Bay), and the independent, Indigenous-run Weengushk Film Institute (M'Chigeeng First Nation), provide film and television production programs. The college programs largely focus on directing and writing. Weengushk Film Institute is an Indigenous-centred program that integrates land-based training delivered on-reserve; it aims to support Indigenous youth to develop skills in film and television and contribute to Indigenous narrative sovereignty. All of these schools have had some success streaming graduates into production crews that are supported by crew lists that film coordinators maintain in various cities. Informal and

formal mentorship programs offer further support. Since 1988, sixteen film festivals have been hosted in cities and rural areas from Thunder Bay to Moose Factory.[5] While most of these showcase student and northern films, only the Sault Film Festival (2020) and Reel Northern Flicks (an offshoot of Festival of the Mind in Sault Ste. Marie) exclusively focus on independent films from Northern Ontario.

It is clear that film and television production has found a supportive ecosystem in the region; film production, COVID notwithstanding, continues to increase in number, size, and quality. These productions have benefited communities, companies, and individuals. However, our conversations with artists, filmmakers, and talent across Northern Ontario have demonstrated that systemic, cultural and other issues present challenges for northern filmmakers and communities. Summaries of production numbers and economic spin offs can flatten the complexities of a region like Northern Ontario. Underlying assumptions, structures, and processes influence, and often directly determine who makes films, the kinds of films that are made, and the communities chosen for productions and production companies. These factors have everything to do with creative control and creative content.

To understand the current structures and relations within the film industry in Northern Ontario, it's important to consider historical trends.

> Northern Ontario has an economy that is unique in contemporary economic terms. Its development was based almost entirely on the resource needs of twentieth-century industrialism. Unlike

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4   Ibid.

5   The festivals include: Cinéfest Sudbury (1988); Vox Popular in Thunder Bay (2004); Weengushk International Film Festival (2018); North Bay Film Festival (2016); the Shadows of the Mind Festival (2000) and Summer Shadows in Sault Ste. Marie; Junction North and Queer North in Sudbury; Timmins Film Festival (no longer active); Northwest Film Fest (1992), Northern Frights Festival (2015), and Sudbury Outdoor Adventure Reels (SOAR) (2021). Two Indigenous film festivals in the region that are no longer active are Weeneebeg Aboriginal Film and Video Festival in Moose Factory and Biindigaate Indigenous FIlm Festival in Thunder Bay.

other regions, it had no real experience with nineteenth-century forms of agricultural development or "competitive" capitalism. Apart from the region's Aborignal communities, almost all of Northern Ontario's communities were created by large resource- or transportation-based corporations, often in partnership with the provincial government, to extract natural resources for use elsewhere. —Chris Southcott[6]

Historically, northern (settler) communities have been single-industry towns that depend on extractive industries such as nickel, gold, copper, lumber, and other primary resources. Local workers provide labour and service companies emerge to support the primary industries. In most cases, the companies are owned and controlled, often with global ties, by out-of-region companies. It has been well documented that dependence on external companies leaves workers and communities vulnerable to fluctuations in global market economies and that companies with distant shareholders do not have the same commitment to local communities (such as for wages or investments). This service-to-capital model is so entrenched in local systems and culture that it seems "natural."

While diversification has been challenging, the success of the film industry has been positive for Northern Ontario, establishing networks, enabling training, and propelling ongoing and future projects. Many communities, from cities to smaller towns, have looked to film as a "small town makes good" opportunity; they see film as a means toward economic opportunities and a way to generate local jobs. The sector's acknowledged position as an economic driver, in fact, enabled film and television production in the region to avoid the effects of the 2019–20 Ford government cutbacks to the arts.

Investments and funding models

The NOHFC is a major support and influence for the industry; it provides significant incentives for companies to produce films in Northern Ontario.

> Rolling Pictures has been around for several years now. We have a large facility in Toronto. A couple of years ago the partners decided that they wanted to be part of the growth of the film industry in Northern Ontario. With the talent base that exists here and the reasonable real estate costs, there was an opportunity to focus our future growth in the North. —Robert Peace

The investments made by NOHFC and various promotional strategies like those of Cultural Industries Ontario North have successfully increased the number and size of productions in Northern Ontario and helped build what currently constitutes the Northern Ontario film industry. CEOs of a number of successful, northern-owned and directed companies, such as Sudbury's David Anselmo (Hideaway Pictures and Northern Ontario Film Studios) and North Bay's Lieann Koivukoski (Post Production North), have made use of these strategies and, in turn, helped advance the sector in the North. Significant jobs and spin offs have resulted from these efforts. The majority of these types of production, however, are more commercial than artistic (e.g., Hallmark) and tend to favour out-of-region and large production companies as a development strategy over independent, filmmakers and producers from the North.

The dominant model for film development in Northern Ontario echoes the processes of resource sector extraction in the North: investment strategies, leveraged to attract out of region companies, are supported by local labour and the growth of service industries. Infrastructure funding—by NOHFC and city or municipal incentives—

6 Chris Southcott, "Regional Economic Development and Socio-economic Change in Northern Ontario," in *Governance in Northern Ontario: Economic Development and Policy Making*, Charles Coneth and Bob Segsworth, eds. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 16–24.

is used to largely support private, for-profit and southern-based companies to build production facilities, hire crews, and shoot films in the North. In alignment with how the mining and forestry sectors develop, out-of-region companies establish northern headquarters to be able take advantage of funding and opportunities for growth: they own the productions, tell stories by southern filmmakers, and manage the employment opportunities. There are some benefits at the local level, but the distribution, sales, and profits from these productions do not benefit the economies of the communities—instead, they flow south. In this reality, the key creative positions (directing, producing, acting) are held by visiting talent, and this negatively affects the region's perception of its role in the industry and the types of stories that can be told. It also suppresses the encouragement and support that is necessary for northerners to tell their own stories and become visible.

There are great examples of collaborations between external and local companies. Lieann Koivukoski cites the relationship between Post Production North and Rolling Pictures, for one. But there are also stories of companies that set up northern mailing addresses in order to access NOHFC funding. There have been companies who have taken advantage of the system and incentives, yet have no commitment toward contributing to developing the northern film industry and returning the benefits they've received from the initial investment in their own films:

> From what I understand some of it is just purely financial. I've heard some unfortunate stories that to receive funding in Ontario they start a business in Northern Ontario, and then they access the funds that way, which to me is wrong. It's really unfortunate. I wish there was a way to prevent that because it's just misusing that funding. The funds have to go to the people that are doing the creative thing in the North.
> —Zach Cassidy, *filmmaker, Timmins*

There are additional stressors in accessing funding for some Northern Ontario production companies who struggle with NOHFC's criteria for productions and budgets or are ineligible for NOHFC funding. As an example, the NOHFC funds only up to 50% of eligible Northern Ontario–based expenses and there is a maximum, capped using a tiered system that is based on the total northern spend. This forces a producer to stack an application with other funding sources. Small productions struggle to source the preliminary funding that would enable eligibility with NOHFC. The resulting perception is that the NOHFC only funds large projects because of the obstacle of paired funding and funding limits—when, in fact, the NOHFC also funds projects under $5 million.

In general, small, independent projects are less feasible compared to big productions. They often have smaller marquee value, difficulty securing distributors, and fewer produced films than southern companies. They experience significant, and varied, obstacles across several funders. For example, Ontario Creates has a funding requirement that includes a broad screening history for prior productions. This is a challenge for small, northern productions whose resources for visibility are limited. This effects whether they are picked up by distributors and offered screening time at key festivals or theaters across Canada. As a result, small indie productions are unable to procure the distribution agreements required by NOHFC, nor can they confirm national and international revenue projections. This difficulty is more penetrating for Indigenous producers: due to historical inequities, it is very difficult to establish relationships with financial institutions and property assets are not admissible as collateral for loans.

Tracie Louttit, a film producer and director from Garden River First Nation, notes that the challenge for independent filmmakers is of greater complexity than for big productions because independent filmmakers don't have the same networks, production history, investors, and infrastructure as large, established companies. The challenges for

female-identifying filmmakers are even more formidable and for all Indigenous filmmakers these barriers make producing their stories more arduous than they should be.

> I don't work with million-dollar projects and prefer to work on smaller community projects with smaller budgets. But for those who wish to work on huge projects, having a long-term mentor who has the experience is key in moving forward and navigating the bigger mainstream industry. There definitely is an imbalance and unfortunately, it doesn't quite lean in our favour.
>
> There is a lack of Indigenous female producers across Canada, and particularly in Northern Ontario. There are a handful of women who've been around in the last 30 years like Jennifer Podemski, Loretta Todd, Lisa Meeches, Tracey Kim Bonneau, and Tasha Hubbard. It's very wonderful to see more female Indigenous writers, directors, and key creatives now than there were in the late 1990s. But yes, there is a need for more training for female Indigenous producers here in Northern Ontario—it would be fantastic!
>
> Since the inception of spaces like the Indigenous Screen Office as well as the Shine Network, Hire BIPOC, and others that are now popping up across the country, that help people get their foot in the door and assist with funding, I've seen a change, and that is exactly what we need, it's very promising and encouraging for those who are interested in making a career in film and television.
> —Tracie Louttit, *film producer and director, Garden River First Nation*
>
> The NOHFC has given us a great opportunity to, again, entice people to come up and create here. I would like to see from them a little bit more concentration on helping develop things for producers. For example, to create northern producers that

would be able to focus on northern content. That would need some kind of mentoring system. —Lieann Koivukoski

The experiences of Tracie Louttit and others underscores the importance of targeted strategic funding and investments for independent and BIPOC filmmakers, accompanied by institutions of support that can help them navigate the industry and secure further investments. The current funding framework fails to consistently scaffold northern filmmakers and creative talent. While the NOFHC explicitly states that they fund projects that include "key creative positions in Northern Ontario, and stories that showcase Northern Ontario," their funding requirements—the structure of them—result in funding allocations that regularly support Christmas movies, romances, or more generally, films that use Northern Ontario as a backdrop. High-budget films that expressly tell northern stories, that have close connections to community, and that would seek to hire all northern talent are typically not produced by big companies, and seldomly by independents. Independents might meet all of the funding requirements except those that relate to feasibility and experience.

> I've just looked into the new NOHFC funding requirements for film and television and it makes it pretty difficult for an indie filmmaker like myself to receive funding. I understand, it's expensive to make a film, but it seems that what they're doing is just catering to the same handful of producers. They have found their way in this system, and they are the people that the funding seems to funnel through. So, it's kind of a tease to independent filmmakers to say that there's all this funding available for film projects, when the funding is really catering to the high-level infrastructure of the industry instead of the creative people and projects of Northern Ontario. I can't produce a film the way I used to in art school. I can't get volunteers to hold a boom pole for days on end. Everybody needs to pay their bills. So, funding's what's needed, and it's

needed on a more intermediary level. $5,000 in the form of an artist support grant is helpful, but that doesn't do much for a film, unfortunately. Likewise, one million dollars doesn't go too far on a larger production, but that is more than I would need. So, if there were some funding options in between, or a program to help put the infrastructure in place around an independent project, that to me would be a more considerable step towards developing film as an art form in Northern Ontario. —Zach Cassidy

For emerging filmmakers in Northern Ontario, it is virtually impossible to produce a film with both professional quality acting and audio. There is a significant funding and resource gap between high-budget, highly profitable or feasible films and those that might be produced by emerging and independent filmmakers in the North. The Ontario Arts Council (OAC), through a couple of its programs, provides small grants (up to $15,000 through the Northern Arts program or up to $40,000 for senior filmmakers through the Media Arts Program), and the Canada Council for the Arts (CCA) provides grants up to $25,000.

In fact, through a combination of factors that includes the cuts to the OAC by the Ford government in 2019, there was a steady decline in OAC funding, including media arts funding in Northern Ontario between 2017 and 2020. The following data shows the media arts funding allocations during this period for both Northern and Southern Ontario. There is a greater year-by-year decline in allocation for the Northern Ontario media applications than for Southern Ontario. It should be noted that media arts funding is complicated by the fact that media arts projects often require several years to produce, so filmmakers and other media artists may only apply every two to three years, which can skew the data trends. However, when considering that funding to all disciplines has diminished, it is likely similar in the media arts program. Either way, to establish a robust media arts sector in the region, the

OAC and the CCA might consider targeted strategies that increase support for northern media arts organizations and for individual artists.

Fiscal Years	N ON Funding Change	% Change	S ON Funding Change	% Change	N/S ON Total Change in All ON
FY 2017-18 to FY 2018-19	-$37,490	-18%	-$205,162	-8%	-$242,652
FY 2018-19, to FY 2019-20	-$60,616	-30%	-$226,328	-11%	$286,944
over 3FY's from FY 2017-18 to FY 2019-20	-$98,106	-48%	-$431,490	-18%	-$529,596
over 3FY's	-$98,106		-$431,490		-$529,596
% decrease	48%		18%		20%

11.1 Changes to OAC Funding for Individuals and Organizations, Northern and Southern Ontario (Fiscal Years 2017-2018 to 2019-2020)

There are few sources of funding, however, for lower budget films between the small grants provided by the arts councils and the large budget productions that scaffold funding from NOHFC, Ontario Creates, and others. Emerging filmmakers seeking funding for their projects, or emerging filmmakers with few film credits and little to show in terms of high-quality productions, have low grant success with both the CCA and the OAC. This is a similar situation to how NOHFC allocates funding. The Indigenous Screen Office has helped bridge these gaps, but northern filmmakers struggle to fund their films.

There are some notable exceptions. Indigenous filmmakers have been successful in producing their work from and in the North: Michelle Derosiers's *Angelique Isle* received $686,000 (produced by Toronto production company Circle Blue) and Darlene Naponse received $500,000 for *Falls Around Her* and was funded $530,000 for her most

recent film, *Stellar*.[7] In addition, a few other independent filmmakers, such as Nadine Arpin and Zoe Gordon, have been able to produce and/or work on documentaries and short films. However, most independent filmmakers have said that they were unable to either produce work, find funding, or produce work with the necessary quality to build traction for their artistic careers; they primarily resort to producing commercial work rather than artistic work.

> I've been in a constant state of trying to get back into filmmaking as an art form, but I have to pay the bills. My goal with my business has always been to get to a point where I can pay the bills. I have the equipment I need so that I can start producing art again. I've done a little bit, but not to the level I'd like to. When I get a call from someone looking for commercial video work, I have to answer the call, and that puts off the creative work.

> From my understanding, what tends to happen on larger productions in Northern Ontario, is that there are more opportunities from a business standpoint than from a creative one, and I believe that stems from the structure of the funding programs. —Zach Cassidy

Systemic distribution issues further complicate the capacity of northern filmmakers to reach audiences. For example, while a local cinema might screen a film by a local filmmaker, it is generally very challenging for independent filmmakers to secure screenings in large theaters across the region. Yet, northern films would do well if they could be circulated across the region. It is a similar issue with major broadcasters. These issues are structural and cultural. First, the dominant systems favour the major players; second, there is a subtle, yet effective, resistance to the

local, and to the specificity of the local. With changes to the structural systems that privilege big (and out of region) companies so that independents are consistently supported, northern productions might have more success. A regional distribution circuit that includes theatres, broadcasters, and possibly library networks could potentially enliven and foster a stronger northern media arts, film, and television ecosystem.

Mentorship, crews

> I will be honest, sometimes they work out really well. But sometimes it's the thing that happens on the last day of shooting, and you never actually have a conversation with the person, but you're being mentored. So that their fee can get paid, if that makes any sense. That was at the beginning. I think it's changing, because there's a little bit more monitoring about what's going on with that. That was a challenge for sure.
> —Lieann Koivukoski

The Cultural Industries Ontario North (CION) and other crew lists directly respond to the eligibility requirements of NOHFC funding—productions must hire northern crews. For example, CION's MAPPED fund provides wage subsidies to production companies for on-the-job training; however, the highest level crew member positions that are prioritized in the program include 2nd assistant director, and 2nd assistant camera (learn more here). Participants in this project's conversation circles noted that local hires are often for lower level, "grunt work" positions because the skill set isn't locally available in all communities or the crews are outsourced. While there are positions for northern talent, some have noted they find it hard to shift into that network of trained crew. (For more about strategies that the film union, some companies, and other organizations are employing to train talent, see here.) While both Canador and Sault College encourage graduates to sign up for local crew lists, the transition from student realities to employment in the sector after graduation has accompanying

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7   Stellar was among a number of productions and companies to receive grants in 2021. For the full list, see https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/1000536/ontario-supports-film-and-television-industry-in-the-north.

adjustments relating to capacity, support, and expectations of the position.

> The Sault College Film Program is very story driven. They focus a lot on developing ideas and how to take an idea and turn it into a film script and how to market it. Due to the lack of time within the two-year program there isn't in-depth focus on each department role and the training required to fulfill that role. As a result, a lot of times when you're on set and you bring in a brand new person from the Sault College film program, you're basically having to train this very green person.
> —Jennifer Mathewson, *filmmaker and Film, Television, and Digital Media Coordinator, City of Sault Ste. Marie*

> Our biggest thing is actually training crew members who don't necessarily learn certain jobs in school. Typically, the jobs you learn in film school are writing, directing, director of photography, editing. Whereas jobs like costuming and art department and First AD-ing and things like that are jobs that are not often trained for. And oftentimes, we end up having to find people, like outsource people to bring in, because usually there's like one person in the Sault that's a really good costume designer, and that person is obviously working on another show. And it'd be great if we had a few people who were trained in that specific department, because then we'd constantly rely on people who are local for those jobs. So that's something that we're looking out for.
> —Rebeka Herron, *owner and producer, Rusty Halo Productions; co-owner 180 Sisterhood Productions; co-founder and co-director, Sault Film Festival, Sault Ste. Marie*

Jennifer Mathewson has always encouraged the hiring of graduates, and in particular Indigenous students. Local companies have been building relationships with First Nations communities, but students aren't transitioning into the sector as they experience difficulties integrating and accessing meaningful positions. For instance, in Sault Ste. Marie, while at least half of Sault Colleges' film program students are Indigenous, very few sign onto the crew lists.

> Sault Ste. Marie has a large urban Indigenous population, but our crew base is not heavily represented; only two to five percent of the crew base is Indigenous. For our urban Indigenous population, our crew base is very under-representative. —Jennifer Mathewson

One theory regarding why students are not entering the sector is that students are keen to produce their own stories, but there are fewer opportunities for independent productions, or co-productions to write, direct, and produce the stories they want to see created. There are more crew positions than opportunities to write, direct, and produce—and the crew positions mostly offer work on films written by out-of-region talent. Another challenge, particularly in Sault Ste. Marie, is the lack of a viable bus/transportation system to neighbouring Garden River First Nation, which directly borders the city. (For more on Sault Ste. Marie's film ecosystem, see here).

While there are incentives and mentoring programs to scaffold and develop a northern-based film industry, some research participants noted that production companies sometimes take unfair advantage of tax credits and other incentives; while this was more prevalent early in the development of the various funding programs, there are still some lingering issues. For instance, some offer loose mentoring plans and are marginally committed to northern relationships. Over time, the relationships have deepened, but respondents note that relationships should be reciprocal and work toward supporting northern film productions.

In the beginning, especially with the NOHFC funding, a lot of movies that wouldn't have been able to get made were able to be made up north because of the tax credits and all that. So, we are getting things that never would have gotten off the ground. Whether they were just a bunch of inexperienced producers as well, or just, you know, they're coming up in this area where people know nothing so they can kind of get away with whatever they want, right. So yeah, there was a lot of no pay, low payouts, some people from Toronto were using this show as one of their first key experiences because it was a good bridge for that. I feel like maybe the people from the South that were up here on that show didn't have quite as bad of an experience. But I find a lot of northerners on that show had a terrible experience.

Earlier on, most keys and second positions and all that were brought up from Toronto, obviously. And then the northerners would fill in third positions or daily positions or things like that. But with a lot of the excellent training that we've gotten up here now, in a lot of the shows most of the departments are 100% northern, from head of department to key to first, second, third to whatever, so it's definitely paid off.
—Ashley Nay, *hairstylist for film and television; Vice President IATSE Local 634, North Bay*

Ashley Nay, now a senior technician with many years' experience, made the point that over the last 10 to 15 years, as the sector matured and benefited from sustained investment, the North has developed a reputation for solid crews that are in demand in the North and across the country. For instance, Ashley noted that a large northern crew was on the East Coast this spring for several productions.

For the most part, what it does is to ensure that anyone coming up and taking a position up here from Toronto or from wherever, from any other local, is training anyone in the North who may not necessarily be able to be in that position yet. Or if your head of department is from Toronto, and then your key, like your key hairstylist is from the North. It basically makes the head of the department a tax credit. So, they get that in exchange for training us how to do our jobs up here. It usually works very well, I would say. It depends on the production and it depends on the mentor. Most mentors are very open to training and you get a sheet of paper that basically says, This is what we're going to learn over the show, and then in the end, I grade them and they grade me. I've seen it on some shows where it does get taken advantage of and you have someone in a completely different department that's supposed to be training this northerner just so that they can get the tax credit, which I don't agree with at all. There's some forms that I will not sign. If I don't believe that the mentorship benefited myself or benefited the North in any way or that it's in some way taking advantage, I won't sign the papers at all. —Ashley Nay

Ashley may be able to make these decisions because she has clout and experience in the sector; rookie technicians and crew members, who may not have deep industry relations, or mentors helping guide their way, are more challenged in how they navigate expectations and opportunities.

With my Union [Nabet], the one way that we're trying to kind of work it is that we're developing a trainee position. It might be a week, it might be two weeks, it's still a paid position through the local they are on. They still have to sign a contract. So they're covered and all that. Say it's for the continuity department, because continuity typically is a one-person department and they don't get assistance or anything, so it's really hard to train people. This way, they can bring on a person to kind of shadow them and they can sort of explain what they're doing. They can watch them do their paperwork at the

end of the night just to see what they're actually doing and then still be compensated for being there as well. Because it's almost impossible, obviously, to hire someone with zero experience, and production won't want to pay for that when they could pay for someone who has more experience. So yeah, we've been trying to find the best way to do that so that we can get more skilled workers up here in different departments. Just to help out in the long run with the NOHFC and with productions coming up here, and it'll only benefit us in the future for sure.
—Ashley Nay

Sometimes, too, opportunities do come for northern crew to progress and develop:

> I've got about five or six people that we've trained, but the good part about it is one young woman that has been working for me for the last three years, since she graduated from the college. She got an opportunity to go on set as a DMT [Data Management Technician] instead of just doing the dailies. And she's so funny, she called to apologize. And I'm like, "No, no, you take this, this is amazing." For her, it's the gateway, it's the stairway to developing her career as an editor, because that's her dream. That's what she wants to do. That just makes me so happy. There are other folks out there that need to cut their teeth on the dailies, and then they can go forward and start doing DMT. And then they can do assistant editing, and then they can be an editor, and congratulations, you got your job. And production keeps growing in the region as well. It's been really incredible and diversifying. It's not just Hallmark anymore. In fact, the next show that's coming in is Amazon. And I just got a request from Netflix for some ADR [Automated dialogue replacement]. —Lieann Koivukoski

Funders and support agencies have invested training dollars, time, and resources to establish tech crews and position film companies in the North. It is worth considering that if they invested similarly in creative talent, it is likely that they would foster the emergence of a very strong cohort of northern directors, producers, writers, and actors as well as enable the production of more films about and from the North.

Control and creation of northern stories

While there is an investment strategy and varying financial resources for the development of technical and craft talent in the region, this is not the case for the development of filmmakers/artists and creative capacity.

> My sideline take was always that there's a lack of investment in our creatives. Sure, we have solid crews, but it's unsustainable as a whole if we don't develop screenwriting/directing skills, and since you're referring to funding and capital, producing skills as well. —Jen McKerral, *music agent and co-organizer of Up Here Festival, Sudbury*

When independent northern filmmakers are unable to access funding, or face other structural obstacles, they manage smaller productions and often use friends and volunteers as actors and crew. This approach contributes to important local storytelling and control of the story, but limits the reach of the films. The volunteer and ad hoc elements of the production means that they don't benefit from experienced and trained actors or crew, and it is more difficult to attract wider audiences and future grants.

> I have the equipment and enough experience to make a decent production at the level I'm comfortable at, and it seems to me that movies are moving more toward that smaller level of production, especially since the onset of the pandemic. So, it's kinda been this tough thing, where I want to be involved

in these larger productions, but at the same time I'm not any closer to producing an artistic creation. You know it very much is a business. I'm sure there are great storytellers in Northern Ontario that maybe haven't even considered film as a medium for them because they don't even know where to find a camera. I'm thinking north, farther north than Timmins. I'm thinking Indigenous storytellers. I can't say I know a lot about what opportunities are available to them. I just think, if I have a difficult time telling my stories, guaranteed, they have a difficult time telling theirs. —Zach Cassidy

Asked what it would it mean for northern artists and northern stories to create content from start to finish, Zach responds:

It would be huge, I think. I'm not originally from Northern Ontario so I can't claim what it means to be from Northern Ontario, but over time I've grown to love it, and I've grown to realize that I love it because it's so hidden and remote, it's so nuanced. It takes living there to really start to get it, and that makes me as an artist say wow there is so much potential here for stories, and the longer I've been here, the more I hear about stories from this area. It means a lot especially because it's such an expansive area…how do you feel a community if you're separated by so much space? To me, it's through art, and especially with the technology we have today, it should be far easier than ever before. —Zach Cassidy

[We need] grants, funding, money to the writer and encouraging southern production companies to develop northern scripts for tax breaks/extra funding. —Adrian Lysenko, *writer, Kaministiquia*

Nadya Kwandibens, a highly acclaimed photographer from Animakee Wa Zhing #37 First Nation in Northwestern Ontario, who is beginning to explore video and documentary, has an Instagram following of more than 30,000. She is well known; her large-scale images have been installed on the Ryerson University campus and throughout the city of Toronto. In speaking about the importance of her work, of Indigenous history and empowerment, she observed that digital media offers a set of tools that enable her to tell stories and disrupt colonial narratives. Her activism is navigated by way of her images, which speak for themselves, and through a very active online presence through which she interacts with both Indigenous and settler audiences who want to understand more about Anishinaabeg experiences.

It's about listening to what stories need to be told and being a conduit for that; allowing the space for people to feel comfortable to share their stories. Even the whole practice [of] teaching myself more of what I need to know about myself in terms of decolonization, in terms of what it means to be Anishinaabe. All of these things are so intimately intermingled for me. —Nadya Kwandibens, *artist, Animakee Wa Zhing #37 First Nation*

Nadya and others look to film, photography, and documentaries for ways to tell important stories; the stories also further develop and deepen relationships with the communities from which the stories are generated and have evolved. The stories help to gather larger audiences who are interested in these stories. There is a deep sense of responsibility and reciprocity in these relations to story and community. As Nadya says, she sees herself as a conduit for people to tell their stories safely, and she uses her skills and her platform to help change dominant narratives. Other conversation participants noted that they wanted to see production companies use their positions to facilitate the telling of northern stories, and to support northern filmmakers to tell them.

Northern relations and community investments

We also have really big organizations that are starting to move up here to do their filming. Amazon is coming up. Netflix is coming up. And even looking at it from the perspective of a northern producer, that's a whole other line of paperwork you gotta do—things that you may not be familiar with or that even really apply to filming up here. You know, it's a different… we are still in a state of having, I don't want to say personal relationships, but they have to be a one-on-one real interaction with people.

I think that's the hardest thing, particularly for anybody that works in the arts, or works in film and television. You move, you need to move. And it's about having interactions. For me, it's really important [to have] personal interactions when I work in film and television because if I am choosing a crew, for example, these are people that I'm working with for, could be three weeks, could be three months, it depends. I want to have that conversation to see, and I'm pretty good at being able to figure out who's going to get along with who and how they're going to be able to promote each other. I've made mistakes too doing this, not having that personal interaction or misreading.
—Lieann Koivukoski

As Lieann notes, issues can arise in the development of partnerships, within interactions, or through differences in process. These difficulties can occur interpersonally or at the level of organizations or organizational behaviours, for example, in the relationships between companies that are new to the region and local communities. Differing levels of familiarity or disregarding, or not recognizing, pre-existing approaches can affect how companies become established, and how well they can build crew relationships and contribute to the region's film sector.

Just recently, a couple of new companies have moved in that I'm very cautious about. I actually don't even know exactly where from, but they have started trying to get these mini fights going on within the community. I don't mean the community as a whole, as North Bay. I mean, the arts community or the film community, just to sort of try and push other people out so that they get to wear the crown. Which makes no sense to me. I mean, am I besties with everybody I work with? No. Do they like me? Maybe not. But, if we're on the same page then we know that we're trying to do something as a community as an established working community. We [Post Production North] work, for example, with Rolling Pictures. I've worked with them a number of times and they're great. They've sent me business, I've sent them business, you know, or if they had two projects going on at the same time, and they needed a place to be, we'd work it out, we work together. There are a couple of other groups that we've worked with as well. And then there are others that I will not go near. It's nothing personal. It's just that I don't like the work ethic. —Lieann Koivukoski

The region's larger and mid-sized cities have been most able to benefit from and support the film sector. For example, cities like Sudbury, Sault Ste. Marie, North Bay, Timmins, and Thunder Bay facilitate film production by centralizing various administrative processes, such as issuing tax breaks and creating financial and other incentives to attract production companies and their films to communities. Small municipalities in rural Northern Ontario, however, lack accessible cash from already tight budgets. While they vie for the opportunity to host shoots and attract what is seen as a potential economic boost, they also lack the capacity to provide the range of support that a production company needs, such as accommodation, craft services, vehicle rental, and transportation across distances. The spin off, for the residents and businesses of the municipality, are limited.

You're talking economic development, everybody gets excited about the dollar, right? Even NOFHC. It's great that the program that they have is there. But again, the money that comes in doesn't really go to the people, it goes to the companies that are already in place. So, it's accommodations, it's vehicle rental, it's catering, it's craft, it's sometimes rentals of other things.

Wawa is a good example of that, I don't think it saved Wawa. I think that's a good example. There was *Snow Cake*, I think was the name of the show. It had Sigourney Weaver in it. I'm sure it brought in some economic benefit to Wawa. But how much, I don't know. I don't know if they were being put up there, if they were renting cottages, what they did for catering and craft… they probably brought somebody from Toronto, because I don't know that there would be anything like a basis to support the number of people and what was going on. So yeah, it can be a dream image—I'm gonna bring the moving pictures to my city. And sure, it sounds dreamy, but do you know what that means? —Lieann Koivukoski

Lieann noted that the desire to build production studies may not be necessary, saying that coming to Northern Ontario is about shooting on location, rather than in a studio. This makes sense given the diversity of terrain and the proximity of these locations to Toronto. However, when there are incentives for building studios, they will be built.

60% of the people that think there needs to be a studio built here do not work in this field. Again, stars in the eyes. We already have two studios in Northern Ontario that are not being used. David Anselmo, who now lives in North Bay and shoots most of his shows here in North Bay, still has the studio in Sudbury. I think it's a storage unit now, to be honest. The sound was awful. It's a hockey rink. The other one is in Parry Sound.

I think we only had maybe one or two shows shot there and that belongs to Wendy Morrow. But it's tiny. It's like it was like a lodge that they made into a studio. So this has been attempted before. And I'm pretty confident to say that neither of those are a good example of a studio because nobody consulted a studio. We'll just build it.

I always say to producers when they come into Northern Ontario, "If you want it to look like the downtown area in New York or like Toronto, just go to Sudbury, walk downtown. Don't look up. If you want it to be country, look, there's a merry-go-round and lake waterfront that's, you know, North Bay. If you want it to look like it's way in the country somewhere, you go to Powassan." —Lieann Koivukoski

There is also a risk that if incentives such as the tax credits are reduced or eliminated, big production companies might leave the region if they don't have significant relationships and investments in the communities where they work (similar to the risk of mining companies pulling out of towns across the North).

So they literally just kept contacting a bunch of us [Northern Ontario crew] and pulled us out there to Nova Scotia because they lost their tax credits. A bunch of people relocated—they just moved out of the Maritimes completely. And this year, which is supposed to be so busy, they don't have enough people there to crew at all, which is now going to be, this year, very similar to Northern Ontario, because we've lost so many of our members to the East Coast, to Toronto, and to the Cayman Islands. —Ashley Nay

There are other components of the film industry in Northern Ontario, such as post-production, that some feel are not being developed to their full capacity. Since the internet and digital platforms allow for

remote post-production capacity, companies generally are not using this opportunity to build or enhance northern-based post-production relationships; rather, productions often work with post-production companies in Toronto, Los Angeles, and other large urban centres.

> A lot of that post-production work does go back down south. Because it can be done remotely, you don't have to be there. With ADR [automated dialogue replacement], if the actor is from elsewhere, they'll use a post house near the actor, which further complicates post-production in the North. With NOFHC, or any kind of funding like that, it's all about "stuff." It's not really about labour or people. It's about investing into actual tangible things. —Lieann Koivukoski

As Lieann points out, the investments have grown the industry, but the region needs to begin to equally invest in the people—the creative talent and the highly skilled labour—in addition to investments in the productions and the production studios.

Summary

The film industry, bolstered by a robust ecosystem of service companies, film-training colleges, and experienced talent has grown significantly in the last 15 years in Northern Ontario. Incentives and financial investments, particularly by NOHFC and many municipal film programs, have also aided in this development.

In fact, the region's commercial film sector is an excellent meter against which other media arts sectors, and artist-driven film sectors, can be compared. Through the circle conversations, it is clear that not all filmmakers have been able to move forward with the same confidence as the region's mainstream film industry. Strategic investments and thoughtful supports are needed to build capacity for independent filmmakers and northern producers, particularly Indigenous producers, female-identifying filmmakers, and senior crew positions.

Similar strategic investments could enable positive developments and trajectories for other areas of the media arts sector. Investments into the game arts sector, new media, and artist-run or independent media arts organizations, galleries, and other spaces, could see a dramatic shift in the capacity and creation of new works in the region. While other media arts sectors might not have the same visibility as the mainstream film industry, targeted, sustained, and meaningful investment and support over 15 years could result in a robust and dynamic media ecosystem and vitalize northern artistic creation, storytelling, production, and dissemination. This would ensure that stories important to the region are told, heard, seen, and experienced through a northern perspective and that their creation, production, and distribution are controlled by artists and the industry within the region. Careful investment and thoughtful strategies regarding arts creation in Northern Ontario can build its media arts sector without embedding and reproducing inequities and displaced control currently present in the film industry.

What these conversations suggest

To build a sustainable Northern Ontario film sector and support the production of northern stories that contribute to creative, cultural, and economic impacts, we need to implement a staged approach. It is important to note that through this research project we spoke with many northern filmmakers, producers, and others who typically have less influence in decisions and strategies developed in the region. The conversation circles, interviews with a variety of northern stakeholders, and research into the sector offer the following recommendations:

1. Funders and potential investors might examine practical and systemic questions to understand how to invest strategically:

- What kinds of jobs are being created? Low-level crew positions or highly skilled talent?
- What kinds of history and relationships do these companies have with communities and the industry?
- Does the proposal have strength and do people support it?
- Does the company have a real investment in the region or is it a shadow company, data storage house, or other peripheral site?
- What percentage of the film's income stays in the North? What is the distribution of funding and the economic spin off?
- Will the project use northern production teams or northern post-production companies?
- Will these investments build internal talent and self-reliance in Northern Ontario?
- How are we supporting the transition of students and emerging talent into the film industry and the transition of early career filmmakers and talent into more senior and more responsible roles over the long term?
- Do our current strategies and investments help to tell Northern Ontario stories by Northern Ontario talent?

Diversity of stories and storytellers

- Establish strategic and sustained investment into northern-owned and controlled companies and the production of northern stories by northern writers, directors, and producers to build a northern media ecosystem that energizes and benefits the sector and region into the future.
- Support the develop of "small" stories and productions.
- Small productions with local meaning will have traction/income and not be so dependent on North American/global markets.
- Design targeted and strategic programs to support independent filmmakers and Indigenous and female-identifying filmmakers and producers. These strategies might be cross-regional or community specific (geographical, Indigenous, and/or gender-based).
- Require out of region production companies to produce a certain percentage of stories by northerners and to support, through varying avenues such as co-productions, financial support, equipment lending, or long-term mentorship, northern talent development (e.g., producers and directors).
    - Hire and support the development of post-production talent in the North.
    - Require or provide extra credit to external production companies that share their equipment with, and support, emerging filmmakers, independents, and northern production companies.
    - Offer mentorship for independent and emerging filmmakers as a condition of funding facilities.
- Adapt funding models to provide entry and intermediate level funding. Re-assess distribution and sales requirements for independent films.

Highly skilled technicians and creative talent

- Expand funding for training and mentoring to develop northern talent, particularly highly skilled technicians and creative talent

(writers, directors, producers, and actors). This would enable a viable, stable, and continuous film industry.

- Provide both on-the-ground and virtual mentorship and training for emerging filmmakers.
- Support both on-the-job and long-term informal and formal mentorships with grants and mentor training programs.

Dissemination circuits and visibility

- Pilot a regional distribution circuit/s through existing and emerging networks (including festivals, libraries, and community television) and expand the role of major broadcasters and theatres toward screening northern productions. This could reduce the limited reach and reliance on southern festivals and theaters, create opportunities for larger audiences, and increase distribution sales. Initiatives like these would help build a stronger northern media arts, film, and television ecosystem.
- Build visibility of northern film through a strategic fund that enables critical review and writing about northern film productions.

Northern capacity

- Diversify investment strategies to scaffold multiple trajectories within the film sector. Target particular areas identified by stakeholders from Northern Ontario. Funders and funding recipients should be encouraged, and possibly required, to invest in communities, northern productions, northern creative talent, and support cross-sector and community relationships.
- Replace the current service economy model and bolster the community driven economic and cultural systems that already exist. Strategically invest in, and support, the emergence of northern owned and controlled companies. Examine the circulations of investments.

- Ensure mentorship, capacity building, and sector capacity building activities do not count as one of the three artistic grants allowed per year at the Ontario Arts Council.
- A percentage of the large production company film revenues might be redirected toward northern capacity development.
- Address access and financing issues for Indigenous producers.
- Create funding programs that support training, equipment purchases and lending, equipment co-ops, and other resource sharing.
- Support projects with differences in deadlines (e.g., long term/ fast).
- Consider shifts in funding allocations: What would independent and northern film production look like if NOHFC was the first-through-the-gate funder for small Northern Ontario production companies?

SAULT STE. MARIE FILM + FILM FESTIVALS

Katie Huckson, *Impossible/necessary* (2018). Mixed media. Installation view from *Habitations* group exhibition at 180 Projects (Sault Ste. Marie).

SAULT STE. MARIE FILM + FILM FESTIVALS

My producing partner Jennifer Pun and I have a company called Edge Entertainment. We've been on the scene since about 2011. Prior to that, I was the city's Film Co-ordinator for about three years. We've built the company by servicing other productions up until this year. We've had great success with that over the years; what we haven't managed to do yet, which is our goal, is to have a sustainable influx of projects and a team, a locally based team, that we can download our information to, so that that can create sustainable employment. We can do twofold things: we can develop entertainment, and we can develop the community, the film community, and retain the people that we started to train. We have umpteen people that we've trained here, who go to other cities. So basically, we want to support a sustainable industry in Sault Ste. Marie, that's one of our corporate goals.

—Rosalie Chilelli, *Producer and Managing Director, Edge Entertainment, Sault Ste. Marie*

I think there's so much of an opportunity to build the infrastructure here. And that's the main reason why I decided to move back, and with Trish [Rainone] start our business here because there's so much potential that can happen here. That even just the locations that exist here do not exist in Toronto, you know, and the fact that we're, you know, 20 minutes away from the US when that opens again, that's huge for the industry. Whereas in Sudbury you have to drive. And that's kind of our goal, as well with the festival, we wanted to highlight local businesses.

—Rebeka Herron, *owner and producer, Rusty Halo Productions; co-owner 180 Sisterhood Productions; co-founder and co-director, Sault Film Festival, Sault Ste. Marie*

I have done some independent filmmaking myself. We've never had any funding for any of my films. It's been very grassroots, very low-key, no-budget, filmmaking. I think I've been involved in about 12 different projects.

—Jimmie Chiverelli, *independent filmmaker, Sault Ste. Marie*

The Sault Ste. Marie (SSM) film and festival community is not as established as in Sudbury and North Bay. This is partly due to its geographical distance from other northern film centres, and from Toronto. The now well-established film clusters in Sudbury and North Bay have the advantage of relative proximity to Southern Ontario and 15 years of film sector development. For example, they offer steady employment for local crews, boast numerous service companies, and have seen the emergence of locally owned production and post-production companies, whereas SSM is still developing its film ecosystem and the infrastructure to support the industry. SSM-based production companies, like others in the region, are able to benefit from infrastructure, film development and mentorship grants from the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation (NOHFC) and from the municipal government. For instance, Rolling Pictures received $100,000 from SSM's Economic Development Fund (EDF) to build its Northern Ontario facility in the city's downtown, which the company noted is "a perfect environment to create and grow a post-production hub capable of servicing international clients remotely."[1]

These investments into infrastructure and film development have (as has happened elsewhere) attracted film companies from Toronto and other regions; they establish satellite production studios and bring film productions into the SSM area. (For an overview of the film sector in the region, see here.)

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1 See https://saultonline.com/2018/12/rolling-pictures-expands-in-sault-ste-marie/.

I'm new to the Sault. Twenty-two years ago, I worked with one of the owners [of Rolling Pictures] in Toronto. He started a post-production facility down there. We were a commercial and corporate studio that expanded into special effects and music videos. It was a lot different pace than I was used to. I wanted to focus on corporate work. And so I started my own corporate communications and marketing business. I used that to travel all over the world. So, I was out there with my cameras and lights and mics and doing a lot of testimonial-based work, which I'm still doing today. But back in the spring, of course, COVID hit and pretty much shuttered my business. I got a call from the owner of Rolling Pictures, and he said, how would you like to go to the Sault?
—Robert Peace, *Director, Community and Government Relations, Rolling Pictures, Sault Ste. Marie*

In addition to companies with roots elsewhere, there are a handful of northern-owned and controlled commercial film production companies in the region, including SSM's 180 Sisterhood Productions.

My business partner, Trish Rainone, and I started a production company called 180 Sisterhood here in the Sault, after we had come to the Sault to film a web series called "My Roommate's an Escort Season Two." Trish is originally from the Sault and she wanted to come back and shoot in her hometown. She's, you know, come back throughout the years as an actor primarily working up in the North. I fell in love with the city. I'm originally from Vancouver, and I've kind of made my way out east over the years in the industry. We decided to start our company here. And similar with Rosalie [Chilelli, Edge Entertainment], we are service-based producers, as well as we have a slate of content of originals that we are creating with people in the Sault here and also other people throughout Canada that we want to shoot in the Sault. —Rebeka Herron

To varying degrees, the commercial film companies in SSM, such as 180 Sisterhood, Edge Entertainment, Rolling Pictures, independent filmmakers like Jimmie Chiverelli, or television producers, navigate a number of challenges. These mainly relate to the overall infrastructure required to build and maintain a robust film sector, including a range of service providers and trained crews.

Despite investments, and the establishment of a Film Office and the appointment of a film coordinator by the City of SSM, representatives from the local film industry felt that more work is needed to gain support from the city and local residents:

I think one of the challenges in Sault Ste. Marie over the last 12 years, is that municipally, they can't seem to get behind it. They can't lean into it. I'm not entirely sure why. As private sector players, we're going to lead the charge, all of us. I mean, I've heard what everybody said, and everybody is leaning into their own thing. And we all want the same thing. So that already has overcome one challenge, in that we all have similar goals. And that is what we're talking about, the sustainability, which we've been talking about for years as well. How do we get them on board? We work together to formulate strategies or communication pieces that work, especially in terms of the media. Councillors are always making sure that they're on the right side of every issue, right? So I don't know…it's been a challenge for many, many years. —Rosalie Chilelli

Sault Ste. Marie tends to be very old fashioned. I don't know if it's because of the steel plant here. My entire family came from Italy…my family kind of looks down on something like art, they're like, "Well…what does that do, like, go get a job at the steel plant. That's what people do." They don't see it as this can build the whole city up. It needs to change. And with people like Rebeka [Herron] moving here, and Trish [Rainone],

who was born here, coming back, and hopefully with me not leaving, and we get more and more people here, we can really continue to grow that. —Jimmie Chiverelli

During the conversation with representatives from the film community in SSM, there was discussion about how to build awareness of the sector and its impacts. As the film industry in SSM has received infrastructure and funding support and the impact can be demonstrated, they felt it might be effective at this stage to start "making the case" and apply communication strategies with the city. Between 2013 and 2019 (when the pandemic slowed down production), 32 features, 12 television series, two documentaries and two web series were produced in SSM.[2]

> I think if you're asking, what do we need, Jen Mathewson [the former city Film Co-ordinator] has an excellent list. But I do think it is about the relationships as well. And I also think we have to manage the medium. I think that's what's been missing is there hasn't been a consolidated key message because it's been so scattered. The city is very risk averse. And so I think it's about keeping them on-side and maybe a little bit of education that we've often thought we wanted to do….or the MP, there's lobbying to be done there for sure. —Rosalie Chilelli

> From a city film commissioner standpoint, getting the messaging regarding the economic benefits of film, television, and digital media production is essential. Not only the impacts to the municipality, but also the impacts to local businesses that provide support services. The municipality's messaging only goes so far, they need the support of the local stakeholders to help advocate, help get in front of the NOHFC board members, MPP, MP, mayor, and councillors and show them that information to educate them on the benefits of production.

Delivering that messaging, so it's being heard and understood has been my greatest struggle. There are many people that are quick to dismiss this sector because they don't fully grasp the investment and the permanent infrastructure and jobs that can be created with steady productions volumes.
—Jennifer Mathewson, *filmmaker and Film, Television, and Digital Media Coordinator, City of Sault Ste. Marie*

Trish [Rainone] and I, we've been doing it a different way. We've been reaching out to local businesses. That's our strategy, because one of the things that we've learned, just in the couple years that we've been starting here, is that if we have businessmen and women involved in productions that we do, they also talk to the city about the benefits that they're being given. So, we've been trying to collaborate with as many businesses as we can to give back or to exchange goods or services. For example, we chose our venue for the Sault Film Festival at Northern Superior Brewing. And in turn, we shot eight social media commercials for them, just to show them what film can do. Not just use them as a venue but to give back as well. We've been trying to do a lot of that with a lot of bigger name businesses that the city relies on when having conversations about what their plan is for the next year, that's been our strategy so far. And I'm happy to continue doing that. But also add on to that. And I think this is a great idea Rosalie [Herron] has about us coming together as a team, because I think that's the only way we're going to be able to show the city how powerful of an industry we could be here.

Trying to show them that the film dollar is actually a tenfold dollar, and it affects the whole GDP and the Sault, because we come here, and we bring people here—as soon as we fly a cast member here, it's hotels, restaurants, everything. What's the tourism? What are they doing on their days off, all of those

things are affected because a film comes to town? I think that we have to continue to push them. That it's jobs, not just us getting, let's say a grant to come here, it's us getting a grant that then spends the money here and affects all regions. And we try so hard to work with locals in key positions. That's been our number one goal when we started 180 Sisterhood, is key positions in our satellites as much as we can, which is something that I don't often see in Sudbury or North Bay. They, a lot of the time, bring people from Toronto to work on those films instead. —Rebeka Herron

Across the region, there is a narrative that film productions can help economic and cultural regeneration in northern communities. While the film industry has had a significant impact, especially on urban communities in the region, there are significant infrastructure requirements that are needed to make the industry sustainable. In addition, other factors, in combination with infrastructure, will influence whether the industry will contribute to significant economic growth for local communities and whether there will be a sustained opportunity for northern companies to produce northern stories.

What spurs action around the region, especially if the city has staffing capacity to facilitate film production and the financial capacity to support investments, is when larger companies (which have clout and capacity) organize and lobby. Small companies, and independent filmmakers, have less influence with key players; their needs are also typically quite different from the large companies.

Some other people I've spoken to have cited gear and tech training. I have friends or colleagues that have had just little, tiny projects. They want to do even like a micro short, three minutes, just to learn how to do it. And unless they're going to shoot it with their iPhone, and edit it with like, iMovie, they can't, they can't do it. Because there's no real access to like, "Hey, who can

help us out who knows a little bit about sound or who has a boom mic we can use and knows how to use that." So that's a problem. —Jimmie Chiverelli

Equipment rental has been a huge challenge. Having access to equipment through professional rental services or film co-ops would be awesome up here. I was just thinking back to a few of the cities that I lived in which had film co-ops, which are not-for-profit artist-run centres for film, video, and media artists. These co-ops generally create and facilitate a space for artists to gain access to production facilities and equipment at affordable prices, distribution, exhibition (film festivals, screenings), training (workshops for all levels), and networking with local and other media makers and artists. Having a film co-op up would definitely be a great way to nurture and sustain the film community here in Baawating and beyond.
—Tracie Louttit, *film producer and director, Garden River First Nation*

In response to these comments, a participant from a local community channel noted that by supporting emerging filmmakers and community members with their projects in a variety of ways, including mentoring and offering technical skill development, the channel is helping create local content.

I'm a producer with the local community channel. We offer volunteer opportunities for training, production, along with the opportunity to air content that's already pre-produced on the channel. I'm one of three producers here in Sault Ste. Marie. We are each self-sufficient in producing, shooting, and editing. Often, we will have someone from the community with an idea and no production skill set necessarily so we offer training in all areas including editing to help the individual or group bring their idea to life. There is no charge for service, we are open to

the community. We do find students that are interested in the field, come in and get their feet wet volunteering or in a co-op role. Often these students will move on to secure a position in production or move to pursue additional paid opportunities. —Anonymous

This was welcome news to Jimmie, who wasn't aware of these kinds of local support. Up until the 1980s, community broadcasting and local television were assets for the creation and dissemination of local work by community members, emerging filmmakers, and other media artists. The development of professional broadcasters and filmmakers (for instance, see Wendy A. Hamilton's experience here) was a result of the surge of local documentaries, stories, and experimental work produced during this period. Community television stations were active, vibrant spaces that broadcast almost entirely local content; there was enough local broadcasting that career development was a viable option for those engaged or interested in this field. Currently, career trajectories in broadcasting and film are less direct within the community.

> The Sault College film program is very story driven. They focus a lot on developing ideas and how to take an idea and turn it into a script/film and how to market it. Due to the lack of time within the two-year program there isn't in depth focus on each department role and the training required to fulfill that role. As a result, a lot of times when you're on set and you bring in a brand new person from the Sault College film program, you're basically having to train this very green person. Students only have a basic understanding of deal memos, call sheets, and other important paperwork. A mentor has to train them on day-to-day tasks and on-set etiquette. Given that this person acting as a mentor is a full-time employee it is difficult to provide adequate training. Often students or new crew are left to complete tasks with little instruction or guidance, which can be overwhelming for green crew. —Jennifer Mathewson

Rolling Pictures was asked by [Sault Ste. Marie MPP, former Ministry of Colleges and Universities] Mr. [Ross] Romano a number of months ago, and then by Sault College, to participate in creating micro-credential courses in the area of post-production, etc. The twelve-week micro-credentials were to be more geared to retraining people for some of the niche jobs in the industry. I.T. positions, translation, all kinds of different things. One of our owners, Mike Forsy, came up with about 20 different careers within the industry that aren't the typical ones that most people even think about or even learn about at the college. So, we were going to be working with the college to develop the content of those courses, and then they will be delivering them. We would then be working to train the people in the real world sort of thing in those areas. Unfortunately, it was clarified by the province that while there was funding to develop a course, it was limited for each college, and more importantly we were advised that there were no additional funds to actually teach the courses, so the whole thing came to a halt. —Robert Peace

One lesser-known avenue of support is the local community channel, which looks for content and can help with short pieces.

> We take a lot of those green students, even high-school students, or people that have generated an interest in production later in life, on the set with us for the opportunity to learn hands on. We often work on a one-on-one basis, training on camera, writing, producing, editing—supporting the individual to the point where they are self-sufficient producing their own content. The ultimate goal is for us is to provide access to the channel and the opportunity to support the community. The hardest part I find is similar to what I'm hearing from a number of you [other film sector reps in the conversation], as you know, is to create a sustainable volunteer pool of talent. Once someone is hirable,

if they are keen, they will want to be paid for their efforts so it would be great to have a direction to point them in where their skills can be utilized in the North. I'd also like to say, if there's someone that you think just needs a little bit of time on set, or just extra time with a producer, that's what we do. Please send anyone our way who is looking for more experience.
—Anonymous

Conglomeration in the media sector has resulted in very few locally owned television stations and a small percentage of local programs that are aired. The Canadian Content regulations by the CRTC addresses this gap in local content. Establishing outreach and local content programs enables the local community channel to both achieve its local content requirements and support the nascent film industry in SSM. The local channel program, along with community service initiatives of the big companies such as Rolling Pictures might be able to contribute to a healthier film ecosystem for independent and emerging media artists, as well as for the commercial companies. If so, it would fill a noticeable gap.

Other than the local community channel and the crew positions offered by the film companies, there are only a handful of institutions of support for media artists in SSM. The city's Film Coordinator supports the film and media industries; however, the role is mainly defined to support the commercial film industry. In addition, the city is currently amalgamating the Film Coordinator and Arts Coordinator positions into one position and it's unclear how that might affect both the professional film industry and the community-based arts sector. The local arts council is largely inactive, with only a handful of members, and is not positioned to support the media arts ecosystem. Finally, as already noted elsewhere in this report, the closure of the Ontario Arts Council Northeastern Representative position has effectively removed a central, free, and accessible source for consultation about arts council grants and grant writing support.

A local institution of support is 180 Projects, which, while an important venue for contemporary work (for a detailed story about the artist-run centre, see here) is underfunded and under capacity. Algoma University's Fine Arts Department makes an important contribution to the local arts ecosystem, particularly with the leadership by Andrea Pinheiro, who is herself an interdisciplinary artist and the curator of 180 Projects. The small department, however, is constantly having to advocate for its program. As is seen with other universities, the program can be vulnerable to expectations by the university, as institutions increasingly instrumentalize programs and establish community partnerships. While collaborations and partnerships are very important to the media arts ecosystem, there is a fine balance between support and undue influence of the programming and direction of programs by outside organizations and other institutions.

> We have learned that some other private companies are planning to come to town, specifically for film and video production. It sounds like we will get support for the music and visual art program, if we align with preparing graduates to work at that company. So, we're getting these hints of how our program might be supported if we focus on one direction, however, typically, that's not the way universities are supposed to work. Academic content is supposed to be led by faculty.
> —Andrea Pinheiro, *interdisciplinary artist; founder and director, 180 Projects; Chair, Department of Music and Visual Art, Algoma University*

With few opportunities for artists to train and engage with contemporary practices, fine arts programs like the one at Algoma University, and 180 Projects, are important avenues that need additional resources. One participant wondered what kind of collaboration might inject energy into contemporary media arts practices, exhibitions, and other engagements.

As we've seen throughout the interviews and as we've outlined elsewhere in this report, institutions of support provide much needed infrastructure and help build a local media arts ecosystem. Where there are institutions of support, we see a "virtuous circle" within which galleries and curators present the work of emerging and professional media artists and organizations provide support in career development, artistic development, and advocate for the growth and capacity building of the media arts community. Where there is an ecosystem, artists are able to develop professional careers, and in turn support other emerging artists, influence the kind of works created, and mentor and contribute to a vibrant media arts community.

The group identified several key challenges: Having a large enough number of productions to keep people working all year and having enough trained people to fill positions in the production crew. Companies can bring talent from Southern Ontario, however, the added costs of hiring and hosting out-of-region crew members, in combination with the incentives offered by the NOHFC (they pay up to 50% of wages for northern hires), motivate companies to find northern crew members.

> If we don't have a sustainable industry, we can't keep bringing people into the entry level jobs and train them up to keys. We can't use a local with no experience as a key because it will jeopardize the industry and the project. So, it's always a bit of a balancing act. And then hopefully, because we have enough work that's interesting and challenging, they stay local. So we're back to sustainability. We're back to continued employment and training. I think the pool of people that want to gain access is big. Do you agree? [Several in the circle respond: "Yeah. Yeah. Yeah."] But I think the pool of people that are mentors is small, locally. And then we're back to the same word…we're back to sustainability and sustaining that industry and making sure that

people have work, and well-paid work, once they're trained. —Rosalie Chilelli

The gap in trained crews has meant proactively advocating for continued NOHFC investment, mentorship programs and training collaborations with the Sault College Film program:

> I always try to encourage productions to take on interns from the Sault College film program or through a local employment agency. We encourage paid positions but understand that in some cases that is not always possible. We want to encourage productions to collaborate with these institutions and hope that the experience will provide a valuable opportunity for someone to learn a new skill or trade. One of the things that I did after our last discussion was initiating conversations with producers. I spoke via the phone with a producer in Toronto, and asked him to break down his schedule, his crew needs, and all the entry level positions that you could potentially be bringing on a student or unemployed individual for. He provided me with a list of positions such as grip, electrics, accounting assistants, and office PA. He provided an estimated budget of how much money he would save by hiring a local for the role, instead of contracting someone from Southern Ontario. This producer would save over $30,000 just on hotels and per diems. For six positions. So that generated a series of discussions with him and with other producers. We need to get more of these students into paid positions so that we can actually train them on set, and even do advanced training. I think it's really unique that Sault Ste. Marie has that partnership with the Sault College film program, that we're putting people onto these sets. But for anybody else, a non-student looking to be active in the industry, they don't know how they can become a part of the film industry, how to break into it. Bridging that gap is another step we need to look into. —Jennifer Mathewson

We're trying to grow our business here. That includes also hiring support staff. And I actually just hired somebody for a full-time position in the North for the year because they had interest in learning more about what I do as a producer and how that works. That was someone who was in the industry but out of work, because we actually haven't really had many projects here this year, because of COVID, on the production side.
—Rebeka Herron

Robert Peace has been hiring local freelancers, many of them Sault College graduates, to work on some of his smaller volunteer projects, since Edge Enterprises maintains a database of "all actors or wannabe actors." Unfortunately, the challenge is that training programs for acting don't exist in the North, so it's unlikely key roles will be filled by northern actors until there are ways for them to learn acting.

There is a gap between the college program and the professional productions, with few graduates, particularly Indigenous graduates, signing onto the crew lists. Sault College, like many northern film programs, focuses on screenwriting, directing, and post/production, rather than on the tech skills (like gaffer, hair and makeup, and other skilled trades) that are in demand by production companies.

Our biggest thing is actually training crew members who don't necessarily learn certain jobs in school. Typically, the jobs you learn in film school are writing, directing, director of photography, editing. Whereas jobs like costuming and art department and First AD-ing and things like that are jobs that are not often trained for. And oftentimes, we end up having to find people, outsource people to bring in, because usually there's one person in the Sault that's a really good costume designer and that person is obviously working on another show. And it'd be great if we had a few people who were trained in that specific department, because then we'd constantly rely on

people who are local for those jobs. So that's something that we're looking out for. —Rebeka Herron

One of our goals is to work with Sault College to take a class through the whole process of film production.
—Rosalie Chilelli

Students are attracted to the creative aspects of film, but there are far fewer films produced than scripts, and typically the films produced by the commercial production companies are written and directed by people from outside of the region. NOHFC's northern eligibility criteria doesn't extend past location requirements and incentives to hire northern crew: the type of production, and the level of position aren't defined. The Ontario Arts Council (OAC) and the Canada Council for the Arts (CCA) only fund artistic projects, and the Northern Arts Project (NAP) funding stream at the OAC only funds projects that are controlled by northern artists. These are relatively small grants: NAP has a maximum of $15,000 and the Media Arts Project grant funds $10,000 for emerging artists and $40,000 for mid-career and established artists. In fact, the Media Arts Project grants are also over-subscribed and highly competitive.

Our research shows that from 2017 to 2019, only six northern artists were awarded OAC media arts funding, to a total of $120,622. In Southern Ontario, 155 individual artists were awarded OAC media arts funding, to a total of $3,063,113.00. During the 2019–20 year, no individual artists were awarded funds through the OAC media arts funding. As the chart below demonstrates, there was no funding awarded to either individual artists or arts organizations from SSM from 2017 to 2019. (For more about Jimmie Chiverelli's particular struggles with granting, see here.)

City/Community	Total Amount	Average Grant Amount	Number of Recipient Grants
ALL N ON Funding, Individual and Organization	**$ 439,298.00**	**$ 25,841.06**	**17**
Type: Organization	**$ 356,676.00**	**$ 29,723.00**	**12**
Sudbury	$ 209,243.00	$ 34,873.83	6
North Bay	$ 53,679.00	$ 17,893.00	3
South River	$ 93,754.00	$ 31,251.33	3
Type: Individual	**$ 120,622.00**	**$ 20,103.67**	**6**
Thunder Bay	$ 38,700.00	$ 19,350.00	3
Sudbury	$ 10,000.00	$ 10,000.00	1
North Bay	$ 10,000.00	$ 10,000.00	1
Sioux Lookout	$ 23,922.00	$ 23,922.00	1

12.1 Individual Recipients of OAC Grants in Northern Ontario by City/Community (Fiscal Year 2017-2018 to 2019-2020)

N. Ontario: Year	% of Applications Received	% of Grants Awarded	% of Dollars Applied For	% of Grant Dollars Awarded
2018-19	3%	7%	5%	7%
2019-20	3%	3%	4%	5%
2020-21	4%	7%	5%	10%
3 Year Aggregate	**3%**	**6%**	**4%**	**7%**

12.2 Percentage of OAC Media Arts English Programs Grants Received Awarded, Applied for, and Funded

While SSM did not benefit from funding from the OAC during this period, some context is helpful. First, media arts projects often take multiple years to produce, so artists often apply every two to three years. Also, the OAC notes that there is funding equity based on percentage of the general population in Ontario (Northern versus Southern) and the distribution of artists across these regions. When analyzing the data and considering reasons for decreases in media arts funding, the OAC looked at the recommended grant dollars awarded and how application

numbers may have changed. For example, in table 12.2, the percentage of applications received is shown in comparison to the percentage of grants awarded. For media arts, Indigenous programs, and overall, the percentage of grants awarded in Northern Ontario reads as being on par or higher than the percentage of applications received for the years shown; this seems to also hold true for the percentage of grant dollars awarded in relation to what was requested.

Yet, while this is true if you look at the percentages and financial amounts only, it is critical for granting agencies when considering parity between northern and southern regions to understand the effects of geographic dispersal, demographic clusters, and the relations between artists, organizations, and support systems in northern regions in relation to the reach of the dollar. In the North, as described in other case studies and chapters, ecosystems of support only develop when there are adequate resources (financial and otherwise) to be shared and when there are strong networks that develop as a result. In urban centres in Southern Ontario, the funding extends much farther because costs are lower in the south; there are institutions, deeply integrated or established organizations and artist networks, lending and supply platforms, exhibition spaces, grant assistance, and accommodation that, simply, barely exist (and struggle year to year) within larger cities in the North. In northern, rural and remote communities, except for a few outlier communities, these do not exist at all. Dollars awarded in the North are not equal in effect to the dollars in the North[3]. In the case of SSM, with no regularly funded artists or media arts organizations, it is difficult to build a media arts ecosystem. Targeted outreach and support to increase applications to programs, along with strategic and supplemental funding to address contextual inequities, could help

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3 The OAC has also shared aggregate statistics for the period 2018–20, demonstrating that three percent of applications to the program were northern applicants to the Media Arts program, and these applicants received six percent of the awarded grants. Similarly, these applicants requested four percent of the funding and were awarded seven percent.

bolster both the sector in the region as well as the communities, like SSM, that do not have dedicated or established media arts organizations.

Funding programs and allocations for artists in Northern Ontario have also decreased significantly since Premier Doug Ford's Conservative government mandated provincial cuts. In fact, data demonstrates that the cuts to the arts allocations in the North were 10% higher from 2017 to 2018; and 19% higher than Southern Ontario in 2018–19. In fact, in total, Northern Ontario suffered funding cuts that were 30% higher than Southern Ontario, despite Northern individuals and arts organizations having fewer resources, less capacity and access, and higher expenses than individuals and arts organizations in the south.
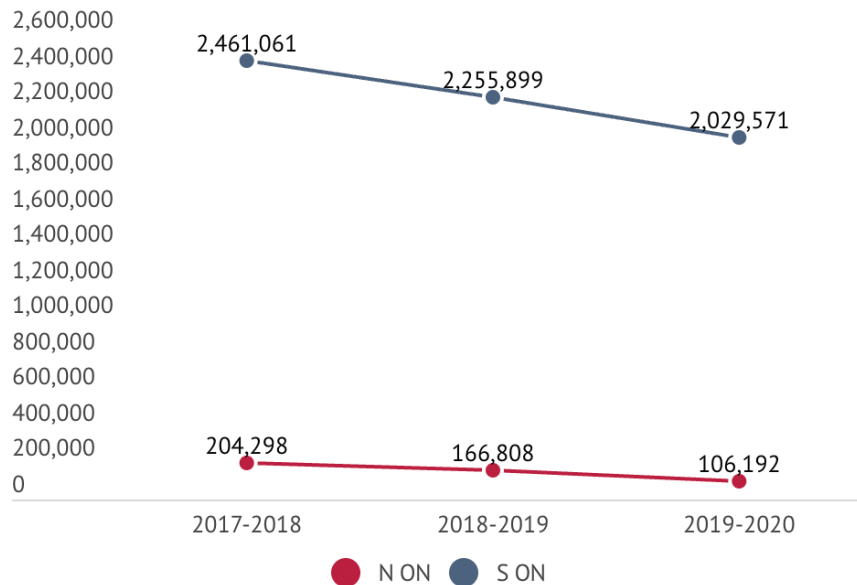
12.3 Decrease in OAC Media Arts Funding for Individuals and Organizations (Fiscal Years 2017-18 to 2019-2020)

Unfortunately, the region was doubly affected by the termination of two important supports: the Indigenous Culture Fund program was dropped by the Ford government in 2018–19, and in the same period,

the Northeastern Ontario Representative position was also terminated. The representative's role was to actively support applicants, assist with grant strategies and applications, and build awareness about funding programs and options to artists and organizations. Cutting this position may be a contributing factor to lower grant success in the region over the last few years.

> Yes, applications are very daunting, it can seem very overwhelming. If you're not a writer, that's a turnoff. If you're not going to work in the formal film industry and want to be an independent filmmaker, you have to rely on writing a lot of proposals, grants, and so forth. Writing grants is an excellent and important skill to have if you are thinking of becoming an independent filmmaker. I do know that the OAC used to have people that came up here to help artists with grant applications. I don't know if they do that anymore. In my years mentoring Indigenous youth I have observed that this kind of support is definitely needed. —Tracie Louttit

> Having somebody that you can communicate with to even proofread your grant, before you submit it being like, "You need to work on this a little bit. This isn't very strong. This is good." I think that would help a lot as well for somebody that struggles with the process of that type of thing. That's a daunting thing for somebody with a disability or two. —Jimmie Chiverelli

> We originally applied a year and a half ago to NOHFC [for our Christmas film]. And it took them that long to make a decision because their board changed so much. And then with the pandemic, they shut down for a while, and they were only doing COVID funding and all this stuff. I have a lot of filmmakers asking, "What's even the point of submitting to something like that? Because I don't hear, they're never going to get back to me." Yeah, I know the struggle. But you know, we have to just

keep trying and keep telling them that we're out here. Otherwise, they're going to close the program, and then no one will get any funding. —Rebeka Herron

The processes—consistent funding and access—that would support Northern Ontario artists is made even more daunting for folks with disabilities and Indigenous applicants.

I'm in a very unique situation, because although I've written and directed about seven short films, I live with a disability and I get funded through disability. So, it's impossible for me to work on a film in which I get paid because I will lose my disability. And that's a scary leap to take for somebody [to give up disability payments], because you don't know how much consistent [film] work you're going to get. So every film I've worked on has just basically been a bunch of people doing it for the experience of doing it. And it's tough to get people to commit to do a project that is basically just like, "Hey, come on out. And we'll just see what we can do with a bunch of people just doing this." We've applied for funding in the past. It's very hard for me and my creative partner to get, I think, because in the grant application we've put that the writer/director is trying to defer his payment. I don't think…that's a very hard thing to get funding for, saying, "Oh, but we're not gonna pay the director." I don't know if looking at some sort of honorarium is a way around that, putting that in the literature of funding to say, "Hey, the director just needs this." —Jimmie Chiverelli

Graduates and independent filmmakers interested in being involved or employed in the industry are presented with multiple challenges, including training, guidance through mentorship and on-the-job training, and support from granting agencies. Indigenous graduates and graduates with disabilities face additional barriers. Data demonstrates that grants are not allocated with parity. While roughly 62% of

Indigenous artists are in Southern Ontario, they receive 66% of the funding allocation and higher grant amounts.
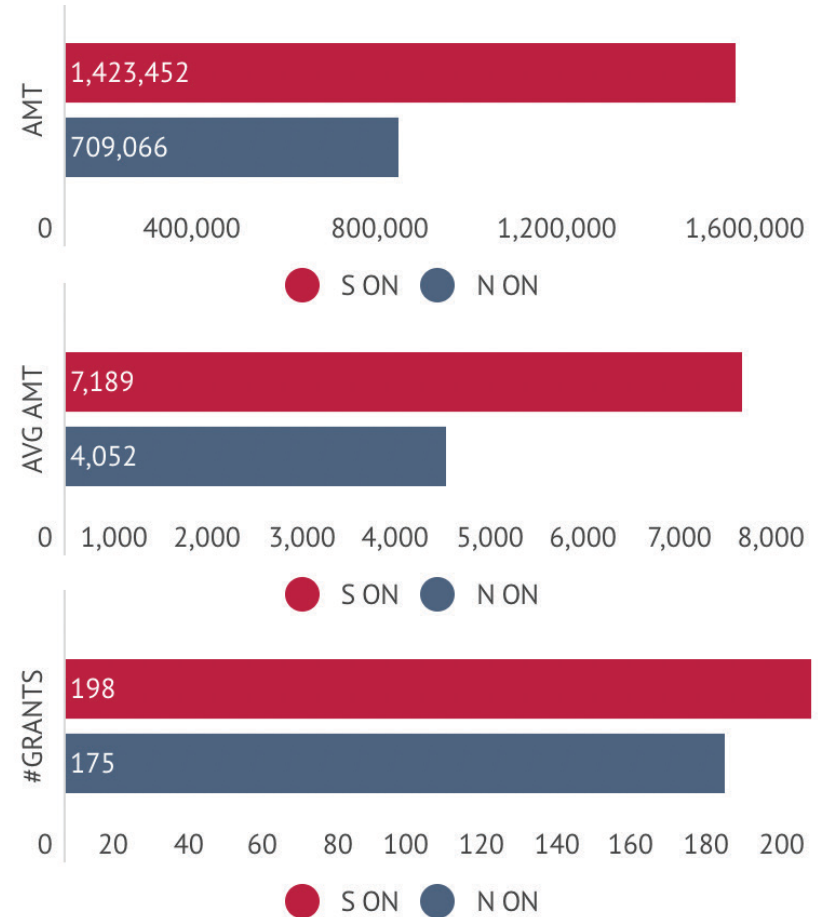
12.4 Bar Charts of OAC Grants to Indigenous Artists Northern and Southern Ontario: Amount, Avg. Amount, and Grant #'s. (Fiscal Years 2017-18 to 2019-2020)

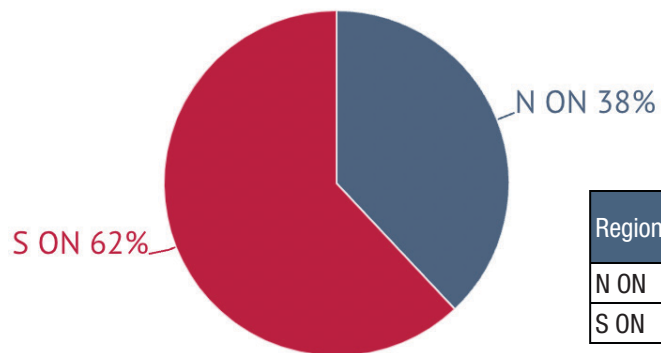| Region	Amt	#Grants	Avg Amt
S ON	1,423,452	198	7,189
N ON	709,066	175	4,052

12.4a Table of OAC Grants to Indigenous Artists Northern and Southern Ontario (Fiscal Years 2017-18 to 2019-2020)
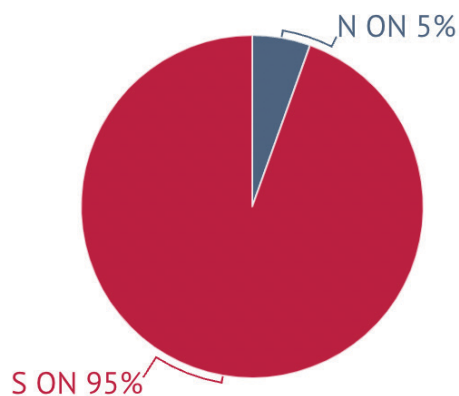
12.5 Population of Northern and Southern Ontario [StatsCanada][4]
12.5a Population of Northern and Southern Ontario [StatsCanada]

Region	Total Population
N ON	780,140
S ON	13,448,494

12.6 Indigenous Population Northern Ontario and Southern Ontario
12.6a Indigenous Population Northern Ontario and Southern Ontario[5]

Region	Indigenous Population
N ON	142,235
S ON	232,160

I think Rebeka can attest to this, it's an uphill battle to begin with. You're able to get paid only if you don't have a disability [in order not to lose disability benefits]. Rebeka and I talked about this. Rebeka deals with imposter syndrome, where

she's a female filmmaker, a young female filmmaker, and she's constantly fighting against the systemic problems that entails. And that's something I can have empathy toward; but, unless you live it, you don't know. And we all face these different challenges of these systemic problems. It would be interesting to sit with somebody and really explain to them, it's already such an uphill battle for any compromised group of people. So, whether that be a young female director, whether that be someone like me that has a disability, it's already hard enough, and it's making it harder for a big group of people. I can't even imagine, begin to fathom, how hard it is for an Indigenous filmmaker that doesn't even have the transportation to get where they need to be to go to a workshop or go to an audition [the group had noted that the Sault bus service ends at the edge of Garden River First Nation]. It's very, very, very heartbreaking to hear that there could be all these young people living in these places that want to do it, and just the issues that are preventing them from doing it beyond just being like a cut-throat, uphill battle to do any of this stuff. It is not just for film...for everything. It's an uphill battle in every way. That's not fair. —Jimmie Chiverelli

Prior to this role [Film, Television, and Digital Media coordinator for the City of Sault Ste. Marie] I was working in the industry. I was working as an assistant production coordinator and a production coordinator as part of the International Alliance Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) Local 411. I was also assisting Rosalie [Chilelli, Edge Entertainment] with a lot of the work that she was doing. My contract [at the City] is coming to an end in December 2021. I am working with Sophie [Edwards]. She has been training me for a project that I'm working on, which is a social enterprise I want to start in Sault Ste. Marie. It is film-related and focuses on filling critical infrastructure that is missing in Sault Ste. Marie's film sector. I want to hire people with disabilities and marginalized

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4   The population statistics were sourced from StatsCanada: they should be understood as indicative, not absolute, numbers.
5   See https://oacas.libguides.com/c.php?g=710398&p=5063055.

community members. I want to get people with disabilities, the LGBTQ community, people with mental health issues, addiction issues, I want to give them a place to be able to create content as well as rent equipment. I want to bring all the content creators together, get everyone collaborating together, and continue to build that network. —Jennifer Mathewson

The industry has had to develop strategies to address persistent gender inequity, harassment, and violence in the wake of #metoo. But making efforts to respond to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action and grappling with the lack of representation from BIPOC communities are equally necessary. While there is better gender parity within film crews than in the past, representation at higher executive and more creative levels continues to favour white men. The SSM film community has strong representation by women in senior positions, as evidenced by the circles brought together for this research; however, Indigenous participation and integration into the sector is an issue, despite a large Indigenous population in the region and high numbers of BIPOC students who are enrolled in the film program at the College.

> The film program itself has seen higher Indigenous enrollment. Approximately 25% are typically Indigenous. Another 50% are immigrants coming into the community. And then the other 25% are from Sault Ste. Marie or Southern Ontario. —Jennifer Mathewson

Yet, only a few BIPOC graduates sign onto the crew list.

> Sault Ste. Marie has a large urban Indigenous population, but our crew base is not heavily represented; only two to five percent of the crew base is Indigenous. For our urban Indigenous population, our crew base is very under-representative. Producers like Rosalie [Chilelli, Edge Entertainment] are trying to build these relationships with our

First Nations communities to develop the training and want to bring First Nations people onto set into paid roles. —Jennifer Mathewson

Efforts by the SSM companies to remove barriers and increase accessibility to Indigenous and new Canadian and international students are important, as all facets of the industry need to work to build relationships and start to repair the effects of historical inequities and lack of representation in meaningful rather than tokenistic ways. This doesn't happen within structures that only enable low level crew positions. For example, in their efforts to work with local Indigenous communities to build inclusion and representation of Band members on productions, Edge Enterprises is trying to shift the way these connections are made:

> We have a formal program that we are working with Garden River [First Nation] on that will allow us to target what the four positions are that we'll be making available. We're fitting the need. We're not trying to create the position and then find the fit; we're trying to find four people that want to start working in film, see what *their* skill sets are, and then find the position within the crew for them. Wanita Jones from Garden River is putting together a list of who might be interested, and it doesn't have to just be students, it could be people that are changing careers. So, if an electrician doesn't want to do that anymore, and might want to be an electric [technician], then maybe there's a fit for that. So we're trying to do it a little bit opposite than the traditional way, which is: here's what's available, who's available. —Rosalie Chilelli

Other efforts include more focused scaffolded training to support transition into the industry:

One of the things we've done to address the challenge of bringing someone green onto set with the Garden River training initiative is we are looking to have mentorships from Toronto, whether they're on our project or not, to do what they've been doing in the BIPOC community: putting a mentor with a trainee and then doing a couple of virtual workshops with them and prepping them and then doing physical workshops. This would require someone to coordinate the training, but I think it's going to be worth the effort.
—Rosalie Chilelli

All the participants agreed that the process isn't as simple as advertising for crew positions on reserve.

When we did casting calls for Indigenous youth years ago; it was really hard. They were so shy to come out and audition, so that we realized early on, even when the ads were coming from the North Shore Tribal Council or Garden River [First Nation] themselves, they still were hesitant. There is an inherent mistrust. We do have to respect that. Thus, working with the Employment and Training Centre within Garden River, and Wanita [Jones] has been a much better approach. Often youth don't even think film work is an option. If you used to work in construction, you don't really realize that building sets is something that you could do. And I think there's a disconnect there, film jobs are not just directors and producers. So I think that's also one of the things…one of the ideas that we're trying to shift is, "If you could work in film, would you? And what did you do before, or what do you want to do?" So, I think that transition of skills is important. And also discussing the other barriers. In speaking with Wanita, she said, "You know, one of the barriers is transportation, there's no public transportation out of Garden River. So if you don't have a car, if someone doesn't pick you up, you can't get to work on a set at 5 a.m. or 3 a.m."

Aside from this and other barriers, we are trying to address that some don't have laptops. If they want to come in and work as a production assistant, everybody comes with their own little kit. Well, if you don't have a kit, where are you going to get it? There's quite a bit of work related to chipping away at the barriers. Like Robert [Peace, Rolling Pictures] said, it's not the same as posting an ad. It's very different. —Rosalie Chilelli

Casting has been a huge thing for us. We have a Christmas movie that's coming. And one of the things that not just us, but also distributors and broadcasters are looking for is to hire BIPOC crew and cast. And that's something that I've always wanted to see out there. And I'm so thankful that finally, the voices, you know, have been loud enough. And we're trying harder and harder now to do that. And I think that's just an initial step. I think we can do better and continue that.
—Rebeka Herron

Building meaningful relationships is a long-term commitment and requires that Indigenous communities define what the relationship, and their involvement, might look like. When asked how the companies foster relationships with surrounding Indigenous communities, and how they adhere to various protocols, the group shared the following remarks:

I will say there is a Protocols and Pathways [document] that the ImagineNATIVE Film and Media Arts Festival has put together that I find very useful. Not just working with Indigenous people, but also, in general working with people who have different cultures and backgrounds. That's something that I use a lot when I work with tech. It's a unique company that I work for, and I've worked at this company now for over four years. And we still see a lot of misunderstandings and misgivings that have happened over the years with colonialism that still

makes Indigenous people unsure about motives with for-profit companies and things like that. And like Rosalie [Chilelli] says, it's a relationship that we have to continue to build, over and over and over again, not just like within our local community, but as a whole. —Rebeka Herron

I've been working with First Nations for over 20 years. I started working when I worked for The Lung Association, and we did smoking cessation, programming, and education. We started working with the Indigenous community and agencies personally back then. Those relationships, if respected from the beginning, will grow. If I had a question, I would ask it, respectfully. I learned about the traditions. If I didn't understand a protocol, I just asked the question, and it was always appreciated. So, I think fostering those relationships, is like anything else. I definitely still see many challenges. When I was with the City of Sault Ste. Marie, you would think that those relationships were strong, but there were still a lot of misunderstandings. To address that challenge, when we saw an opportunity, we would go to the person that we knew as part of the Band and ask that question. I mean, I'm not answering this in a very strategic way, because these relationships aren't strategic. They need to be authentic. I think one of the things that happens is, when municipalities or other groups approach it as a strategy and want to have this agenda, all these agenda items will be like this. That's not the way. It's about conversation. It's not so linear. So, I think understanding that the approach is not a linear approach is also relevant. —Rosalie Chilelli

Respondents have found that making space for meaningful relationships and receiving direction from the communities has helped build connections to the industry.

I feel it is important for productions and producers to follow the *On-Screen Protocols & Pathways: A Media Production Guide to Working with First Nations, Métis and Inuit Communities, Cultures, Concepts and Stories* [produced by ImagineNATIVE]. Ensuring that producers reach out on a production that's looking to go on First Nations reservations. Our local First Nations communities had no policies or protocols for scouts and/or productions wanting to film. I shared with them the ImagineNATIVE document. Location scouts engage with their land officers, who now escort the teams around their communities. We always make sure that they're adhering to that. The First Nations land officers are great aids to scouts; they really have an intimate knowledge of the lands and various looks. They are very welcoming to film groups, and we encourage all productions filming on their land to support their local businesses and follow all proper protocols. —Jennifer Mathewson

We have projects on our slates that are…we're working on that deal with Indigenous groups in the west, where I'm originally from, and in the east and also in Alberta. We're constantly trying to educate ourselves and find the right people from those communities to speak to about the content that we're making, and to bring them on to the projects early, so that these projects can have truth and a realness to them that they need in order to make content. And we do want to, you know, now that we've kind of started roots here, we want to continue to grow that and work with Indigenous folks in the area. —Rebeka Herron

I guess I stumbled into our approach to building a relationship with First Nations. I was out scouting for a film with members of the Garden River First Nation on their reserve lands. After seeing the beauty and hearing the history, we decided to create a coffee table book that celebrates their reserve land and some of the Elder's stories. We've gone and done extensive drone

photography on the reserve and interviewed several Elders and taken portraits of them. The book will help celebrate and educate people of the rich natural and cultural heritage of their neighbours.

We've just completed an art exhibition (Art X) with local Indigenous art in our office studio space. We hold these exhibitions quarterly with different themes. The exhibition featured art, storytelling, and music. I meet with Chief Rickard regularly along with some of the council members. The last two weeks, I've been out on the weekends, helping them fight illegal logging that's going on some disputed lands without any consultation. There's just been so many things. And now I am working on a Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women project. I have worked with Chief Sayers and Cree Nation as well to come and work with them to help tell their stories.
—Robert Peace

In its efforts to address representation and equity and to work with communities, the industry needs to be inclusive, create access to its resources, and become allies. The industry must avoid historically paternalistic dynamics of "helping." There needs to be a defined and obvious, restated commitment to supporting the production of northern stories by northerners until such stories are normalized. Direction needs to be received from the communities and, perhaps even more importantly, the communities need to guide and implement the infrastructure and ownership of the stories, along with access and ownership to the medium. Involvement on big productions as crews, and potentially as cast, can be meaningful and provide access to jobs in the industry. However, calls for Indigenous narrative sovereignty need to be taken seriously. Narrative sovereignty isn't just consultation so that productions are more "real" or representative of the stories, it's also shifting dominant representations of Indigenous lives and histories, and most importantly, shifting who's writing, directing, and producing the stories. It also means making space for all kinds of Indigenous films to be produced, from historical,

cultural stories to contemporary culture and issues. For this to happen, communities require the types of training and mentorship that the representatives discussed in all aspects of film production. This includes writing, directing, producing, and technical positions. These forms of training must be paired with sustained infrastructure and funding so that communities are equipped, experienced, and have the infrastructure to control the medium and the story.

> One of the things that Batchewana First Nation has been doing is bringing in Indigenous producers who have put on filmmaking workshops for the youth. Trying to promote cultural storytelling and engaging youth in filming. So, they had a program come in, and they're trying to do it once a year now, where they have the students participate and all the kids make their own short film. So that's a great thing to get them engaged and get them interested in the film program.
> —Jennifer Mathewson

> The American Indian Film Institute has a long-time Tribal Training mentorship program that they've been doing forever for Indigenous youth of all ages. They travel to different communities and provide ten-day film bootcamps, delivered by filmmakers from all over. The bootcamps culminated with a community film festival so the youth could share their work with their families and relations. That program has had an impact—a lot of those kids actually have gone on to tech school. I found that it was really super effective at introducing youth to filmmaking. —Tracie Louttit

Of the 32 commercial features or 12 television series filmed in SSM between 2014 and 2021, none were written or directed by northerners. The documentary and web series have a better ratio of productions by northerners: Dan Nystedt, who recently returned to SSM, directed a documentary (an independent production) *De-Railed: The National*

Dream, The Story of Short Line Rail in Canada. One of the web series—
My Roommate is an Escort—was created by and starred Trish Rainone, a
Saultite and the business partner of Rebeka Herron in 180 Sisterhood
Productions (no connection to 180 Projects, the artist run centre,
profiled here). Another documentary, although not produced or directed
by northerners, followed two SSM locals in their work to establish the
sites of paintings by the Group of Seven. Trish Rainone and Rebeka
Herron are shifting the dynamic, with two 2022 productions, *Butterfly*
and *The Bone Curator*, being written and/or directed by them.

> I think one of the things that's lacking, even though there's
> so many programs out there, is giving a voice to people in
> the community, or giving a voice to young people and older
> people. I think we've always been interested in diverse voices,
> and we just don't see the stories coming out of the North, let
> alone Sault Ste. Marie. I think those are really important things.
> There are many opportunities, whether it's humour, or more
> intense…I think there are many stories to be told. We're all very
> interested in that. —Rosalie Chilelli.

What small indie filmmakers like Jimmie Chiverelli would like to see,
and what would benefit the larger media arts ecosystem in the SSM
area (and other film clusters in the region), is for established commercial
companies to support independent filmmakers and the production
of local stories on several fronts: first, to extend their expertise,
training, opportunities, and equipment to emerging and independent
filmmakers; second, to encourage and support the production of local
stories and the development of creative talent, including directors and
screenwriters; and third, to use their collective influence to encourage
the city and the NOHFC to support the creation and production of
northern stories. Similarly, as we've heard from other filmmakers across
the region, the NOHFC could expand and adapt existing programs
and criteria to support independents, and to require a percentage of

northern stories and productions. (For more detail on these strategies,
see here).

Collaborations between the companies have also proved fruitful. For
example, Rolling Pictures has been making its production studio
available for visual arts exhibitions, such as its Art X Project which
featured the work of local Indigenous artists, storytellers, and musicians,
and launched a coffee table book the company helped the Garden
River Lands and Resources Department to produce. The exhibition
is curated by Annie King, originally from SSM, who returned to
teach in the Algoma University Fine Arts department; her practice
works between drawing, sculpture, and media installation. Film
sector representatives noted that this research project was fruitful for
them; it brought them together to develop some strategies, increased
communication between them, and encouraged them to share resources,
like crew and actor lists.

Resource sharing could have a positive impact on indie filmmakers like
Jimmie Chiverelli. As an emerging filmmaker, he has been challenged
by difficulties accessing equipment, finding mentorship, and receiving
funding. Lack of funding has meant that untrained friends have acted
in his shorts as a less expensive option than hiring professionals. These
challenges translate into lower production values. Each challenge has
a related effect: low production values on artistic projects can affect
success with arts council funding and acceptance into film festivals.
Film festivals are generally important distribution avenues for indies as
there are few festivals in the North. In addition, northern independent
productions are not always highlighted by festivals in the region and
almost never elsewhere in Canada. (For more about distribution in the
North and expansion of the festival circuit, see here.)

> It has passed through my head to sending Robert [Peace] an
> email and saying, "Would you ever consider being executive
> producer for this thing that I wrote?" And then maybe there's a

way that Rolling Pictures gets the funding to make the project and either I get paid through studio time…or maybe if they've already secured all the funding, there is a way for me to just slip through and not get paid at all, and still see my project being made. It seems like a natural pairing, right? It seems like it should just be something that happens, that the larger companies support the smaller filmmakers. —Jimmie Chiverelli

Whether or not Rolling Pictures or another company jumps in, Jimmie identifies the structural issues that give big film companies advantages over small independent filmmakers, particularly those who face other disadvantages and challenges. Certainly, small indie filmmakers need to put in the time to build their practice and their portfolios so that they are more able to be successful with funding applications. However, there are filmmakers who may not want to develop large projects; as we've noted in the broader film industry piece ([see here](#)), there are funding gaps between the smaller OAC grants and the larger NOHFC projects. Jimmie is excited about the possibility of the larger film companies in SSM pooling their resources and their clout to support emerging and indie filmmakers. This could help encourage the NOHFC to adapt its funding criteria and programs to help build a more robust, accessible, and equitable sector in the region. This kind of support and investment will help all filmmakers and film companies, including the indie and emerging filmmakers, develop their skills, attract more attention to the sector through their projects, and tell northern stories.

> In terms of retraining, we'll be adding a not-for-profit component of the company, almost like a foundation. So that part of what comes into the company can be part of that foundation. What exactly it could look like is still to be decided, and because it's so new, what will that foundation support? Will it support more creative work, like giving people their voice? Or will it support more hands-on training to build the crew capacity? We want to give back. And there's room for many

players and way more growth, way more. You can only see five percent of the iceberg right now for sure! —Rosalie Chilelli

Sault Ste. Marie Film Festivals

The Sault Film Festival is a festival created to celebrate Northern Ontario talent. This is the only festival that celebrates specifically Northern Ontario filmmakers, musicians, and artists. The main reason we started the festival was actually to create a network of people who could meet each other and form relationships and work on projects together and offer training. —Rebeka Herron

I'm the president of the Shadows of the Mind Film Festival here in Sault Ste. Marie, which has been running for 21 years. It's a film festival that's focused on mental health and addictions issues, as well as talent in the North. We've been showing the films that were shot in Sault Ste. Marie for close to 15 years, I think. We also have the Reel Northern Flix showcase, which is curated by Candace Day at Sault College and shows short films from all over Northern Ontario with a focus on student films from Sault College, Canadore, that kind of thing. —Jimmie Chiverelli

Rebeka Herron and Trish Rainone founded the Sault Film Festival in 2020. Its mission is to support independent, and exclusively Northern Ontario filmmakers and inject energy and support to the northern film ecosystem. While less known, Shadows of the Mind Film Festival and its offshoot Reel Northern Flix is one of the longest running film festivals in Northern Ontario. It, too, presents short films from the region alongside other films that examine, highlight, and share stories focused on mental health and addictions. These two festivals are making an important contribution to the northern film ecosystem.

Cinéfest Sudbury does have some northern films that they screen, but the majority of their content is actually from outside Northern Ontario. And a lot of the [festivals] do have a category for northern filmmakers. But it's not the whole festival. So, we wanted to actually create a festival that was just that.
—Rebeka Herron

At the moment, the definition for northern films primarily includes those shot in the North with northern crews.

Yeah, shot in the North. Some of the key players, like crew, would have to be northern, that kind of thing. We have a competition for each kind of category to celebrate those talented filmmakers and encourage them to continue making films during the year, because that's kind of the mentality behind the film festival. The only way to grow the industry is to also encourage people to make content. And so this was kind of a way for us to do that. Some people had submitted, like, five projects to us, and we probably only screened one. We tried to make it an even playing field, but also celebrate top talent. We tried to program as much as we could and also celebrate as many people as we could. That's kind of how we did it our first year. It's probably going to change the second year as we grow, but still keeping the focus on northern films. —Rebeka Herron

The artistic direction of these festivals takes into account the gaps in film distribution in the region, the lack of opportunities to screen work, and the emphasis on big box films and films by commercial film companies. In the long term, the biggest benefits to independent film in the region will come when festivals can focus beyond northern audiences watching films that only have northern crews or that feature local landscapes to northern audiences viewing films written and directed by northerners. There are still relatively few films with northern content.

Our goal is to be able to pay filmmakers for screening their films once we have enough revenue to do that. Same with guests, we did give honorariums to our guests who had workshops. And that's one of our goals for us is, we're more of a, I would say, a training, art Film Festival. Our goal is to expand the northern talent pool and celebrate that. Whereas I think Jimmie's [Chiverelli] is more about bigger films and getting the word out about mental health, which is completely separate.
—Rebeka Herron

We don't have a submission fee. At our festival, we're paying the films to play. So, if we book an Oscar contender movie, that sometimes costs us like $460 to get that film.
—Jimmie Chiverelli

While Shadows of the Mind Film Festival presents work from outside the region, there is an understanding that the experience of mental health and addictions can be quite different for people depending on where they are and the contexts they live in. Despite the pandemic, Shadows of the Mind has continued to be a very local experience. For example, even the tickets continue to be printed and torn as audience members enter the door. This hyperlocal experience may be one reason why the festival is less known in the region, but things are changing.

I got involved with the Shadows of the Mind Film Festival actually volunteering as an usher...because it's mental health, mental health–based. I live with hypomania, hypo-manic bipolar disorder. And it was actually a counselor I had, said, "You love film. And you're passionate about the mental health aspect of this, you should get involved." So I started off just volunteering, ushering with a flashlight. And about three or four years later, I found myself as the president, which is kind of crazy that had happened that quickly. We've run for 21 consecutive seasons. And we saw our most profitable and well-attended seasons in

the last three years breaking 6,000 patrons through the door.
—Jimmie Chiverelli

This significant audience demonstrates that they have a long-term and committed audience (Jimmie says the core audience returns year after year), that there is a significant issue of mental health and addictions in the region, and that film plays a role in the lives of those with lived mental health experience and those working in the field.

> We've shown numerous films, documentaries, and fictional films over the last few years. We showed *Jordan River Anderson, The Messenger* and we had Nogdawindamin bring their staff out to watch and held a panel after the film, where we had some of the Elders from the Indigenous groups around Sault Ste. Marie come, so that people watching the film...especially with the fictional films…could ask questions, like, "How true is this to the actual experience?" and the Elders can really speak to that. So it's an educational experience for everybody.
> —Jimmie Chiverelli

When asked what they had observed about audiences, Rebeka and Jimmie noted:

> So basically, as soon as we print our booklet when our advertising goes out, if there's anything having to do with the North, Sault Ste. Marie, people will come and see it. And I've just noticed when you've worked with the film festival for so many years, you see a lot of the same faces over and over coming to all the films. But when the film is made in the Sault you see a lot of *different* faces…even the content of the student films from Sault College, we get a different clientele out to those films. I would say from my experience with Shadows of the Mind, if we show film that was shot in Sault Ste. Marie or Wawa or anywhere in the North, it sells out. Right away. We've

had to add extra screenings of films that are shot in the North. We had a bus travel from Wawa two years ago to see a film that was shot in Wawa. When we show films that were shot or that took place in Thunder Bay, we have people travelling. Our festival doesn't happen at a very opportune time for travelling. It happens at the end of February, beginning of March. Yeah, really. And we've still had success with that. —Jimmie Chiverelli

> Whenever I go down to Cinéfest [Sudbury], you see a lot of the crew. If they worked on that film, they're coming, they're bringing their families, and they're travelling. Some people are travelling from Thunder Bay area, but even for the Sault, travelling three hours just to go and see this one show that was shot in the North that their families worked on or friends of theirs worked on. You see a lot of those people going to these screenings. Absolutely. —Rebeka Herron

Rebeka and Trish Rainone and Jimmie's filmmaking experience informs their leadership and engagement with the festivals—they know the challenges and opportunities for the industry in the region.

> Yeah, for us, I think, we do make content and we [primarily] want to celebrate the other filmmakers that are a part of our content. We did show one [of our own] projects in our festival, but we made sure that it was not in competition.
> —Rebeka Herron

> I think there's a lot to be said, though, also about holding a film festival and then holding yourself accountable and saying, "Hey, here's our piece that we did." You're saying, "Hey, we're here doing this as well. So we're not just hosting the festival. We're also creators. So if you're interested in this, you've now met us, our film has also played. So come and talk to us about networking, about what projects we might have that you can get

involved in, or how we can assist you with yours." So I think it's great that you don't put your film in competition, because that does seem a little like an inside job. But I think it's important to show at least one piece that you've worked on. It's like, "Hey, we're doing this too." —Jimmie Chiverelli

Yeah, well, that's the thing too. I think most people in the smaller community here know that we make content as well. But a lot of our focus now is also on how do we reach other people in the other regions like Timmins, North Bay, Sudbury, Parry Sound, and Thunder Bay, etc. which is a little bit harder to do? —Rebeka Herron

Shadows of the Mind primarily screens films on site or location rather than planning a digital event. However, their method of selecting films is changing. The increasingly digital process is likely to broaden the scope of their film offerings. In earlier years, they relied more heavily on reviewing already curated selections, such as sending several board members to Cinéfest Sudbury. But as a smaller festival without high visibility, they might not see the screeners for larger productions, and might be unable to pay the screening fees.

In the last few years, we've been sent numerous Vimeo links. When we get sent screeners or Vimeo links, obviously, more people on the board are able to see them. Whereas if we get three or four passes for Cinéfest [Sudbury], it's the same three or four people seeing all the films. That's why sending films online or viewing films online has been more productive for us, because the entire board then has the option to see the film and vote on it. The more we could have that, the better off we would be. I think it's tough to get a screener for a film, like a bigger film, something that would play at a Cinéfest or TIFF. It's good to go to the festivals and experience how other festivals run and see what we could be doing better or different, but I

think that having more access to the [screener copies] would be beneficial for us. —Jimmie Chiverelli

We use FilmFreeway, which is a submission portal where filmmakers submit to us; so they send us screeners. They'll send their posters or synopses, their crew. Which is much easier for us because it allows us to share all of our screeners with our team and also with our jury. Whereas going to festivals is a little bit trickier. Oftentimes we are using our social media to get the word out for filmmakers to submit or we're actually individually messaging people that we know in the industry, and also the college and university, and the reserve and things like that asking people to submit. For us it's more getting the word of mouth out there to submit versus going to film festivals to acquire content. We have a very extended submission period, because we know that filmmakers leave things until the last minute. And we wanted to encourage them to continue creating content and remind them every time there's a deadline for a new extension, "Don't forget to meet that film deadline." Because, you know, we're more of a filmmakers festival. —Rebeka Herron

The digital world also comes with its disadvantages, particularly for smaller festivals like Shadows of the Mind. Viewers can access films online before festivals can screen the movies.

Now it's an extreme challenge for Shadows of the Mind to book films before they hit streaming services. This is killing us. The films we would show that would be our big sellers, like a film that got nominated for six Oscars….before I joined in 2010 to 2016, those films would sell out. And now they're not, because right after we book them for our festival, they're on Netflix. Someone can watch it in their pajamas at home when they want to see it. —Jimmie Chiverelli

This shift has influenced how the Sault Film Festival is thinking about their content, and in turn may well be a positive turn for independent films, emerging filmmakers, and their smaller projects that have less visibility.

> We screen a lot of shorter-form content, which doesn't really get streamed, and that is actually very helpful for us. Filmmakers submit to festivals and then they hope to maybe get picked up by a distributor or platform, or even like somebody like CTV, CBC, right? Oftentimes after film festivals, your film ends up on YouTube. So, we become part of that movie-going watching engine that helps short-form content filmmakers get their picture seen. —Rebeka Herron

The pandemic has changed the dynamics of festivals, pushing most of them to digital platforms and hybrid presentation formats. Not only have audiences and platforms changed, but content and access to it:

> Yes, the pandemic has really affected the industry, and how people view content now. A lot of big studios have pulled their content and are waiting until this pandemic is over to release. So it's a very weird time frame right now, where everybody needs content. But the big studios are not necessarily putting those out. You have actually a lot of platforms now buying independent film, because they need the content to sustain their audience. And so independent filmmakers are seeing a rise in sales and then in distribution, but I have a feeling that some of that might change once this pandemic is over because the big studios again will try to have theatrical releases and try to get people back into the theater because that's where they make their most money. —Rebeka Herron

> Me and Rebeka are both thinking that after the pandemic is done, we're gonna have a resurgence of like the roaring 20s, after the Spanish flu, where everyone just wants to do stuff so badly they won't want to sit in their pajamas and watch Netflix anymore, because you did that for a year and a half, and like, let's go and get together, let's go to a festival or let's get a camera and a bunch of friends and just try to make something because we've been so bored and conditioned into doing nothing. Hopefully, maybe that would be the silver lining in this whole thing is that arts communities [will surge]. —Jimmie Chiverelli

> I hope that it will really push people to really explore what's out there and in their community. I'm hoping we'll see a lot more people who become creative, or learn to be creative during the pandemic and now want to share it with everybody. —Rebeka Herron

As Rebeka explains, their focus is on shorter form content in an effort to make less-visible films more visible. As we noted in the Visibility, Validity section (see here), it can be very difficult and limiting to look to single, big festivals like the Toronto International Film Festival as *the* place to premiere a film. It is incredibly difficult to be picked up by the big film festivals, whereas there are numerous smaller festivals and significant audiences that can be reached and created within the region and in smaller venues across the country (and internationally).

Small indie projects are less feasible compared to big productions, have smaller marquee value, and difficulty securing distributors. In addition, indie filmmakers usually have fewer films under their belts. So, while it's difficult for small productions to procure distribution agreements, festivals like Reel Northern Flix and the Sault Film Festival can potentially make a difference. The search for national recognition overshadows the existence of a regional audience consisting of additional "micro-audiences." These smaller audiences are unacknowledged because the larger national audience is valorized.

If we can partner with other film festivals, like Shadows of the Mind, and we're working a little bit with Vox Popular in Thunder Bay, because our goal is actually to turn this eventually into a touring festival and tour around the North with northern filmmakers, like the winners, or the smalls section, and have that be something that goes around to the communities who maybe don't have access to the film festival. If they're not always online, or maybe they have bad internet, because that happens a lot up north. And we would probably partner that with a training session. So, it'd probably be like a weekend thing where we'd go up and travel and then have a workshop and film and have some film screenings from the festival. With the Sault Film Festival, because it is a non-profit we want to offer some kind of training opportunities for these non-key positions to get people started. Right now we're starting to do a video series and podcast series to at least start virtually because of COVID. This and the other idea we had was to eventually travel with the festival, but also travel with training. And so the festival could be curated in the city. —Rebeka Herron

These strategies respond to the contexts of the region—access to distribution, smaller communities, geographical distances, and available audiences. Festivals are finding ways to engage audiences that might otherwise watch films on the big streaming platforms or who are normally unexposed to content made by indie and northern filmmakers. Filmmakers and audiences are fostered through workshops, training sessions, and filmmaker/audience interactions. This local/digital approach confirms what we've learned from many of the conversations—the digital both creates and limits access. The context is important: those organizations, festivals, and artists that find ways to engage a home community by showing films with a high local or regional content from a physical space, and who also utilize digital platforms to attract audiences, are finding success.

Shadows, and Reel Northern Flix with its 6,000-plus audience, is still a limited audience, which Jimmie attributes to their overly analogue approach to outreach:

> Our age demographic of 65 and up still wants to see a film in the theater over watching it at home. Those people will still purchase a ticket, even if it's $14, to go to the cinema to watch this film that they could watch on Netflix, whereas the younger generation just simply will not do that. They would rather just watch it at home. Our festival runs for at least seven days, but some years nine or ten days, with up to thirty feature-length films, showing throughout the week. And we're still even struggling with people in our own community who don't know we exist. We've been here for 22 years. We've had a very hard time getting the demographic of our audience younger [than 65], we just cannot seem to do it. I don't think we're using social media to the best of its ability. We don't have a specific social media person. That's something that we have room for in our budget that I would like to eventually hire somebody to do it. —Jimmie Chiverelli

> Yeah, we're the opposite of you. Yeah, we did everything online. All of it was social media marketing, and just calling people…we didn't sell any physical tickets. And, you know, we did have a few older people who were interested and came out. But I mean, our demo was definitely a lot younger than yours. Most of our viewership was in the Sault, because we also held an event in person. I would say the majority of people were younger, like students from the college and things like that. We did have some people from North Bay and from Sudbury, who either had online tickets or came to the festival, which was pretty awesome. I mean, we were very small, because it was our first year. —Rebeka Herron

The Sault Film Festival managed on small donations and personal funds in their first year by relying heavily on volunteer time and a digital format:

> We definitely will be going through the grant route. We've already been in talks with the OAC for the Northern [Arts Projects] grant and things like that. Now that we have had a festival, it definitely does open those doors, then to NOHFC as well, they've asked us to submit. So we'll be doing that.
> —Rebeka Herron

Their goal to tour the region, bringing film and training opportunities for filmmakers is a much more complex endeavor than running a local festival. To do this, Rebeka notes, will require "a coordinator—there isn't the funding for that, which is often quite scarce in a non-profit kind of world."

While the Sault Film Festival is applying for an OAC grant for the 2022 festival, the small grants (maximum $15,000) are typically not enough to cover the administration and coordination, screening fees, space rental, and other expenses of a film festival. The artistic directors already have a relationship with the NOHFC through their production company, 180 Sisterhood Productions, which can help open doors and provide other partnerships with the film industry.

Shadows has never received OAC funding; it has relied mostly on sponsorships.

> I know that we don't apply for grants. We get a lot of sponsorship money. CTV and Bell are our biggest media sponsors. And Brian Prue is our sponsorship guy so he would have the actual figures but I'm fairly certain our biggest, our gold sponsorship, our platinum sponsorship from Bell and CTV is somewhere between $15,000 and $20,000. And so there's a

lot of moving pieces, it's kind of a Goliath that seems to just roll on every year. I guess it works a lot in the same way as the grant applications do, when you're applying for sponsorship money, and you've done it for 20 years, it's a lot of copy and paste. This has worked for all these years, so we'll just copy and paste this and it moves it along. But it's a huge endeavor to take on.
> —Jimmie Chiverelli

While the sponsorship income for Shadows of the Mind and their offshoot Reel Northern Flix is stable, curation is a challenge. They try to find films by folks with lived experience of mental health and addictions, not just films about folks with these experiences.

> Right now the problem is finding the content, finding the documentaries, finding the films, where these people were given the avenue, these voices were given an opportunity to tell their story. So I guess that kind of all plays into what everyone else is talking about, like, how do we get these people involved in filmmaking, involved in the entire process? —Jimmie Chiverelli

As discussed elsewhere (see the <u>SSM Film case study</u>, for instance), filmmaking is challenging for all artists. There are additional challenges, however, for northern artists and marginalized and BIPOC filmmakers. Filmmakers with lived experiences of mental health and addictions find it harder to both create their own work and be involved in the festival itself.

> Most of the people on the board [of Shadows of the Mind] are more in that [mental health] world, but they're on the clinical side of things, not on the side of experience living with mental health. —Jimmie Chiverelli

Jimmie doesn't have any easy answers to address the disparity and challenges people with lived experience face, but he's hopeful that the

new and building relationships between the players in the SSM film and festival industry will create new opportunities, resource sharing, and more access to films and filmmaking. Across the region, we've observed that where there are interconnected institutions of support, a media arts ecosystem is more likely to exist and thrive. Rebeka and Trish are cognizant of the relationships between filmmaking with northern content, training and mentorship, opportunities to screen work, the presence of film production companies, and the long-term goal of encouraging and supporting more independent and northern films.

> Our goal has always been to grow the industry in the North. And for us, we see this [the Festival] as an opportunity to do that. Because oftentimes, in these small communities, people end up leaving, right, and they go down to Toronto, or they go down to the States, to build their careers. And we're hoping that people will stay here and help build their career here and grow the industry here. And so that's the bigger factor and why the festival exists. I just want to say how grateful I am that you have been asking us these questions. Because it's so important that we're having these conversations and through this we are now as a community talking more to each other, which I don't think we've done in the past. So I do want to thank you for that. Because you've kind of pushed people in the community now, to speak to each other, and to work together. Jimmie and I are now talking about our film festivals and how we can work that, work together, and also as creators, how we can work together. And that's always been my goal. —Rebeka Herron

What these conversations suggest:

Ecosystem / Institutions of Support: Institutions of support are critical to local media arts infrastructure. These conversations, and the data, demonstrate that the current artistic media arts infrastructure is limited and under-capacity; the challenges for Indigenous, disabled artists, and artists with lived experiences of mental health and addictions are much more pronounced. Strategic investments and programs to support the development of northern artistic productions and the career development of independent and other media artists are required to support the northern media arts ecosystem and address historical disparities. The SSM film companies are motivated to work together to build the sector and explore ways to build the local talent pool. Collaborations with the city, local film festivals, with schools, the local community channel, and with local independent filmmakers can contribute to a more accessible and viable media arts ecosystem in SSM.

Marginalized and disabled media artists: Funders, other institutions of support, and production companies might further examine their systems and eligibility requirements to respond in more nuanced ways to the challenges faced by disabled media artists. Reviewing and amending funding protocols would enable greater access to funding and full participation in a range of roles on film productions.

Funding: The NOHFC (as noted here) could address disparity and the creation of northern content by reviewing some of its programs and establishing northern story and northern creative talent requirements. Dollars awarded in the North are not equal in effect.[6] At the arts councils, targeted outreach and support to increase applications to programs, along with strategic and supplemental funding to address contextual inequities, could help bolster the sector in the region.

Although funding typically is equitable percentage wise (based on population), there are additional costs and resource demands in the region in combination with fewer alternatives sources of income.

Hybrid digital/analogue approaches: There are complex relations between digital and analogue/on-the-ground experiences. The SSM film festivals reach different audiences through different spaces and platforms, and they are aware that filmmakers benefit from the direct experience of participating in festivals that offer more than film screenings. Workshops, training sessions, networking, and other professional development opportunities build a different kind of energy and engagement than a purely digital festival. Similarly, making films requires on-the-ground production, which is why the pandemic so dramatically affected the film industry and the current demand for independent film to fill the gaps when larger productions were not being produced during this time.

Resources

- *A Toolkit for Inclusion & Accessibility: Changing the Narrative of Disability in Documentary Film* (although not Canadian) is available through FWD-Doc: https://www.fwd-doc.org/toolkit.
- Audio description (AD) tools have been developed to make films more accessible for blind and low vision audiences, including the films included in the New Day distribution co-op: https://www.newday.com/blog/2019-01-14-audio-description-tool-equity.

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6 The OAC has also shared aggregate statistics for the period 2018-2020, demonstrating that 3% of applications to the program were northern applicants to the Media Arts program, and these applicants received 6% of the awarded grants. Similarly, these applicants requested 4% of the funding and were awarded 7%.

GAME ARTS IN NORTHERN ONTARIO

ElizaBeth Hill, *Treaty of Paris* (2021). Digital media.

GAME ARTS IN NORTHERN ONTARIO

> When you're cold calling game studios they tend not to be super interested [in our students]. In Montreal or Toronto there's a ready workforce so why would you take a risk and take on the responsibility of a student from a town and a program and everything you're not that familiar with. It's tricky to get your foot in the door.
> —Orion Atkinson, *Program Coordinator, Interactive Media Development Program, Confederation College, Thunder Bay*

> To my knowledge, and the knowledge of everyone I've spoken to at Art Fix, there is currently no organization in the region that offers programming, [informal] training, or mentorship in video game arts.
> —Rémi Alie, *Art Fix of Nipissing*

Anthony Baumgartner, a game developer, graduated from the Interactive Media Development Program at Confederation College. Prior to the pandemic, he worked for the Near North Mobile Media Lab (n2m2l) at its Kenora location. Anthony was very interested to talk with other game developers about their experiences developing games and game companies in the region. While many of our facilitators spoke with artists, curators, and arts administrators from their local communities, Anthony's research took him farther afield; his own experience had shown him that game developers often work in isolation, and that developers don't tend to cluster in any one geographical location. While game development benefits from digital mobility, the lack of infrastructure and opportunities for game developers in the North has often meant that those who are interested in the sector often move to urban locations to pursue their interests. Anthony interviewed six interactive media developers and designers to discover what is needed to cultivate and advance the development of a

more robust digital gaming infrastructure in the region. The interviews include insights into the game ecosystem in Winnipeg and details how an arts-focused gaming non-profit organization emerged from a small network in Toronto. In this section, we share interviews with a range of people, including the six individuals interviewed by Anthony.

Graduates of multimedia or game development programs might begin with an idea of what a career might look like, but to pursue their career, they often find themselves migrating from their community to larger cities that are central to multimedia, like Montreal, Vancouver, and Toronto. Larger cities present many incentives for game developers and designers, including substantial gaming communities, employment at renowned companies, and a network of developers. Confederation College's (Thunder Bay) Interactive Media Development Program Coordinator, Orion Atkinson, is all too familiar with this situation. His graduates are often unable to find local work in the field of video game development. Atkinson noted that there is no shortage of graduates who have the skills to work on visual effects, animation, virtual reality, and video game development projects. However, with few studios in the region and little start-up support or available grants that support career development and integration into the sector, emerging designers and developers struggle to develop careers in the North. Without professional opportunities in Northern Ontario, the alternative for graduates is to work in other careers, such as graphic design or social media marketing.

> In Thunder Bay and Northwestern Ontario the opportunities tend to be graphic design, web design, and social media marketing type [of work] but we always have very artistic and talented students that want to do more innovative creative [work]…[and] it's difficult to find work doing [that] up here. Making video games, special effects, and that kind of stuff… there isn't really that much of any of that going on up here…

there is some but it's very indie or there might be one person working [on it] at home. —Orion Atkinson

Regional gaming events have high sign-up rates, demonstrating an established population of skilled and keen game developers and designers in the region. While some events or companies are no longer running, their former presence is evidence of the region's gaming industry and its collaborations across sectors and with institutions. The Northern Game Design Challenge (NGDC), for example, was created as a way to animate the sector when the national Appathon challenge stopped running. NGDC incorporated as a non-profit in 2016 and was founded by Brittney Smith, Hailey Catherine Short, Brent Langille, and Michael Laurence Daoust. NGDC was keen to focus on the interdisciplinary nature of game development; they invited musicians, visual artists, writers, narrative designers, and developers to create teams for the competition. Presented as a free 48-hour design challenge, it was supported by community interest in Sudbury, North Bay, Thunder Bay and Sault Ste. Marie. Financially, the event was sponsored and run by range of Northern funders, tech companies, and other businesses. In 2018, twenty-five teams of up to four members (a jump from 14 teams who competed in 2017) competed in the Sudbury event. Since the pandemic, however, the organization hasn't been active.

North Origin Games incorporated in 2015 with support from YouLaunch, a program for young entrepreneurs in Sault Ste. Marie (funded by MaRS Discovery District and Ontario Centres of Excellence and affiliated with Sault College and Algoma University). With the aim to create games with educational Canadian-based content, they released one title, Mind Weaver (2015), on Google Play and Apple App stores, but dissolved the company in November 2020. As of January 2022, the Sault College Game-Art Program -- which co-sponsors the Sault Ste. Marie site of the global game development challenge, Global Game Jam -- had 29 people pre-registered for the event.

The reasons that game development companies don't establish studios in Northern Ontario may be because of a lack of economic incentives and infrastructure, combined with a small studio ecosystem in the area. As we've seen elsewhere in the report, available infrastructure and media arts clusters are closely tied to the development of new projects, organizations, and the deepening of artistic practices. It's difficult to assess how much the pandemic played a factor in the dissolution of North Origin Games or the hiatus of NGDC. It's clear that support from funders and an entrepreneurial ecosystem were central to the capacity of these organizations in their emerging phases. Infrastructure support and financial bridges that enable the survival of new initiatives beyond the first few years appears to be an important factor.

The participants felt that the establishment of a new studio, or the enticement of a larger studio to establish one, would jump-start the local industry, create work opportunities, and help build a game cluster. While the pandemic has opened the doors for remote work, northern game developers and designers have to position themselves within a very competitive sector and in parallel to companies that are based in typically urban, southern, game-centric cities. The urban companies can hire employees from a wider pool of local, or networked, labour, and access to gaming clusters offers designers and developers more visibility, enabling them to more easily find employment locally or remotely.

Orion Atkinson likened a northern game studio start-up to a "if you build it, they will come" strategy. In many ways, the gaming industry is similar to the film industry. Game development requires teams of highly skilled technicians and creative talent across a range of disciplines, and it is often supported by investments in technology, equipment, and physical studios. In similar ways to the film industry, the gaming industry is often situated between entertainment and artistic practices. Currently, in the gaming industry in the region, there are a few independent projects and small or informal companies that primarily

work from home studios with semi- or untrained teams, little funding, and a small network.

The gaming sector (and by happenstance, the northern indie filmmakers also) are at the same stage as the region's film industry, 15 years ago. Strategic investment into the film industry by NOHFC, and co-ordinated efforts by several organizations, has resulted in a robust film sector with a number of film clusters in the urban centres, a range of support for industries and film festivals, trained and skilled technicians, and a significant economic spin off. [1] A single project in North Bay, for example, eventually built a significant film cluster. (Read about Lieann Koivukoski and her post-production company here.)

The game development climate in Winnipeg is a good example of the combined impacts of strategic investment, infrastructure, and support. Corey King, an award-winning storyteller, producer, and co-founder of ZenFri Inc., has witnessed the growth of the video game industry in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He described how he established his company:

> When I started [ZenFri, with Dee King], a huge advantage was there was already a studio in the city that had pushed for tax credits and had pushed to help get New Media Manitoba created. Those institutions and local support were already there, which made my life easier. I would also say without the better tax credit incentives in Manitoba it would be unlikely that I would continue game development in a place like Manitoba. Before there were tax credits and more formal and funded non-profits to support the industry, the founder of [the first video game studio in Winnipeg] went to the IGDA (International Game Developers Association) and just got them to give a charter for free so that there is a Winnipeg IGDA chapter. And so by having someone create a chapter [it shows] there is an

organization here for [game development]. It makes a difference. [A similar strategy would connect] Northern Ontario to a brand and a community that's international.
> —Corey King, *Chief Executive Artist and co-owner, ZenFri, Winnipeg*

He revealed that the funding enabled his business to produce game development projects despite its lack of any art or coding skills. A successful $250,000 grant application to the Canada Media Fund allowed King and his team to develop an augmented reality prototype. This later led to more funding for the production of their first video game. Within a few years, ZenFri jumped from developing creative projects with $10,000 budgets to the million-dollar augmented reality project Clandestine: Anomaly. Corey noted several advantages of receiving funding support for game development:

> You can sort of go for bigger ideas, [whereas to do it on your own] you are limiting the scope of what you can create. So you kind of have to go a little bit smaller scale and hope that that makes a bit of money, and then build off of that. Which is doable, but it takes a long time, and it really limits you to a certain end of the market. I don't code and while I can direct art, I can't produce the art needed to make a video game. So that puts us in a little bit of a different situation, in terms of our baseline costs [where] we need to at least hire a programmer and an artist. [Without the funding] I probably wouldn't be homeless but wouldn't be working in games. —Corey King

The ZenFri project benefited from the presence of other gaming businesses and organizations and their assistance contributed to ZenFri's grant success. Evodent Interactive, a senior gaming company, offered guidance, design, and writing support; Dark Spark Studios offered project management and producer support; Jetpack Media guided their marketing and communications strategy; and YerStory Transmedia

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assisted with production of video content. A grant writer, a local 3D artist, and a professor at the University of Manitoba also contributed their expertise to help ZenFri to successfully attract funding and then produce the project.

The company emphasizes its arts background and the creative aspects of their work. King is a graduate of the University of Winnipeg where he studied animation and experimental cinema. Since their initial start, the company has grown; it started with two founders and a pool of contract and volunteer workers and now has a staff of seven. The company continues to rely on a combined local and remote team, but its overall management, artistic direction, and financial decisions, continue to be based in Winnipeg.

There are drawbacks and potential barriers when a company is setting up a business and applying for funding. King explained that typically only 75% of a project is funded; the applicant is responsible for financing the remaining 25% or finding another source to invest the amount. In addition, the definition of grant isn't always straightforward and different types of skills are needed to apply for them; applicants need to be strategic and, aside from their own goals, also try to understand the funder's own objectives.

> These grants aren't actually grants. They're like recoupable advances where they pay money upfront, and then there's a back end, where they get a revenue split. It takes a big-time commitment and there's almost a different skill [you need] in writing those kinds of applications. Different funders fund different things, [they] all have different objectives, so understanding what people you want money from are into, what they like, and what they're attempting to achieve with the funding changes…I certainly in my time, had a lot of people who are talented in many ways come to me and show me things that they wanted to take the same path as me. You could just

tell right off the bat if the idea was just not compatible with anything that would be funded by that source. So, there's a little bit of trying to always understand what the objectives are of the places you're getting funding [from] and making sure that what you're making is aligned with what they want to be made.
> —Corey King

Game developers find themselves navigating the nuanced and sometimes overlapping distinctions between artistic and commercial production and artistic and commercial granting programs. The Ontario Arts Council (OAC), through its Media Arts Program, supports artist-led game development (commercial games are ineligible for funding). Northern Arts Projects funding allows artists to gain professional development in areas such as animation, music, and sound effects. The OAC Media Arts program funds up to $40,000 depending on the program and whether the applicant is an emerging or established artist; the funding is intended for the creation of artistic games and virtual and augmented reality projects. Similarly, the Canada Council for the Arts (CCA) funds artists to create work with artistic merit for inclusion in Canadian and international festivals, such as the imagineNATIVE Festival or European Media Arts Festival, or toward new media programming and exhibitions in art galleries and other art venues.

While both the OAC and CCA support artistic game development with funds to cover artist fees, costs associated with coders, equipment rentals, and software licensing, Ontario Creates will fund projects in categories that include development projects that straddle artistic and commercial lines or that are strictly commercial. Funding applications for these types of projects are more complex because Ontario Creates requires an upfront investment from the applicant. While applying to Ontario Creates might be tempting for applicants who don't have other investment sources, the OAC does not permit the use of OAC artistic grants as a contribution toward commercial grant applications with Ontario Creates. OAC funds artistic, not commercial projects.

Some artists, like Chelsea Reid, a filmmaker and interdisciplinary digital artist in North Bay, have a strong portfolio of artistic and commercial work, as well as the fluidity and interest to work between both artistic and commercial projects. Such artists can develop projects with either narrative or conceptually focused work for presentation in galleries and other artistic spaces; they can also participate in the development of commercial games and, through the financial benefits that result, support their artistic practice. For game developers interested in starting a game development business or a commercial project, however, it can be challenging to find the financial resources necessary to apply for Ontario Creates funding. Unfortunately, this is a substantial obstacle for developers in Northern Ontario—without established studios, developers can't gain strong experience, or evidence (e.g., a portfolio and projects) of their practice to apply effectively. In a city or urban community, businesses and other networks are already present and developers can establish studios, gain experience, and create a portfolio of successful games. In addition, they can mentor an emerging developer or provide financing, or venture capital, as the up-front contribution required by grant applications. Without these connections, investments, and business skills, it's difficult to create high-budget and high-quality games.

Brendan Lehman is a neuroscientist, event coordinator, and game and web developer; he shared his experience of setting up his first creator space in Sudbury:

> We've gotten some space and tried to start a little like co-working [creative] space but it wasn't on good financial footing. Sudbury is not exactly an easy place to be green in the arts space. Especially if you're in media, a lot of it is pretty focused on traditional film and music. So, it's a bit of a struggle trying to find resources. Trying to sell tablespace and studio space to people was pretty hard because not a lot of folks in Sudbury at the time were looking to keep a studio practice. [It] didn't really

seem like it was people's method there. Mostly because these things hadn't really existed before and nobody really knew to look for them. It's kind of a hard sell. Part of our struggle [was] getting some revenue to be able to even start off of a grant.
> —Brendan Lehman, *game developer and organizer, Sudbury*

There are things that Brendan would do differently now thanks to the variety of arts administration skills he learned, such as communications and grant writing. However, his initial efforts demonstrated the challenges of establishing a successful business without tested knowledge and experience, especially in a region where the practice or industry does not already exist. In contrast, Winnipeg has grown, years after establishing its first game studio and a reputation for game development, and has now multiple video game studios, a lively game development community, and college programs in game development.

Orion Atkinson felt that Thunder Bay also has the potential for the same kind of industry ecosystem as Winnipeg. When he arrived in Thunder Bay there were only two web development studios in town, but since then, an entire industry has emerged. Yet, in the game development industry, there hasn't been the same advancement. In communities in the region, web studios have grown in response to demand for web design; this industry has benefited from employing graduates of interactive media programs. Game development in the North, however, doesn't have the same critical mass of local client demand to match with the interest and training of the graduates.

In communities where production and post-production film companies are controlled by northerners, there is a higher degree of creative control over artistic production and forms of innovation. In view of these film investment strategies, a similar investment into the production of films and the development of gaming infrastructure could have a significant and deep impact. It is important to consider how to prioritize investment in the companies and infrastructure that are

owned, and controlled, by northern designers and developers. As we've seen in the film industry, while there is a significant amount of film production the majority of the stories told are written by screenwriters and directors outside of the region. While they may have stature in the industry, they do not represent the region and, similarly, there are few northerners that fill senior roles in production and post-production companies. The establishment of an investment program that prioritizes northern-controlled companies could translate into an industry that is economically robust and effective at creating games that represent and hold meaning for northern audiences. It is well known that when key or senior roles are filled by individuals local to the community, as opposed to imported to the community from outside the region, the commitment to the community is intrinsic. There is a unique understanding of needs. In addition, local hires at the executive level promote visibility—the executive positions provide an incentive and model for future community members (for more about media arts ecosystems, see here).

Without a system of support, game development has been a fairly ad hoc endeavor in the region. As mentioned, the obstacles to obtaining funding results in a focus on more commercial games and film work, rather than artistic projects. Some game developers can bridge the commercial and artistic applications of game development by using the income from their commercial projects to support their artistic projects. Brendan Lehman noted that there is an ongoing debate among developers whether video games can be considered art. While the OAC and the CCA both fund game development, and virtual and augmented reality projects, some game developers feel that their discipline isn't fully recognized, which results in lower, rather than professional, wages. This is partly to do with the collapsing of game arts into broader categories: for instance, with the IMAA which sets standard screening and other fee rates for online and digital projects and CARFAC which recommends minimum professional fee rates for visual and media artists.

The majority of interview participants claim it is not realistic, or even recommended, to focus on game development as an unsupported hobby. Kevin Smeltzer, a computer software and indie game developer in Thunder Bay, shared how developing his own commercial video game, *Rodent Warriors*, affected him. Kevin worked 16-hour days: eight hours at his day job, and the other eight hours developing his game. He worked with an artist for over a year and a half to produce the game's graphics. Kevin says it is not realistic, or healthy, for independent game developers to work as much as he did, but he feels there were no viable alternatives at the time.

> I would love to work on a team, but that seems to be the biggest hurdle we have living in [Thunder Bay], is that there aren't enough people who are interested and willing to work together for whatever reason. If I was in Vancouver, Winnipeg, or Toronto there would be hundreds of people, I'm sure. In Thunder Bay, I just assume that there's no one else out there interested in it so I don't even bother looking.
> —Kevin Smeltzer, *independent game developer, Thunder Bay*

Robin Harbon, a software and indie game developer in Thunder Bay, attested to the lack of a local game developer network. He pursues online and remote game development networks and opportunities because there isn't a local network in Thunder Bay and also creates videos about 8-bit computers and video games through 8-Bit Show + Tell. He collaborates remotely with his business partner, Sam Washburn; they have designed and distributed a number of games through gaming company P1XL. These include *4NR*, an indie iOS game, which attracted attention from IGN Entertainment and IndieGames.com.

> I didn't think I would be able to actually get into video game development, because I wanted to stay [in Thunder Bay], and I got married, had a kid, and got a job.
> —Robin Harbron, *independent game developer, Thunder Bay*

However, by keeping up his Commodore 64 retro computer programming hobby, Robin obtained related work online. This experience developed into more game development opportunities and an accessible network.

> [My] network is pretty good. You have to develop that, and I guess I was kind of fortunate that part of my hobby would turn into a useful network. I personally don't have any problem with [my network] but I could see how [developing one] could be a problem for other people in Northern Ontario, definitely. —Robin Harbron

The strengths of the game sector are underscored by the experiences described by Robin Harbron and ZenFri. The sector can be very fluid and flexible, with teams assembled within geographical or collegial clusters, across borders, or spread disparately throughout the region. As a sector that evolves from digital technologies, it can accommodate remote connections and maximize digital platforms for creation, development, and networking. It can be mobile and move between communities and sites.

Indie game development is an intense endeavor. It can be very challenging to commit to it while upholding other responsibilities. Harbron finds he lacks the energy and motivation to work on his dream projects in addition to family responsibilities, contract employment, and hosting a YouTube channel with Patreon Rewards.

> I still have some of my own game designs I would like to see completed, and it is difficult to find time for that because either I'm doing contract work which is building somebody else's game or programming. And then with YouTube and Patreon I'm making videos and I am doing some programming and some game development there, but it's not like my dream games. To have the money, the time, [and] the motivation all

at once to pursue those independent game development ideas, that's still pretty rare. You kind of have to work hard to position yourself. For a while, I had to work [a] regular full-time job during the day and every night I was doing contract work on [a commercial video game]. —Robin Harbron

While Robin found work in the gaming field, Orion Atkinson noted that most of his graduates from the Interactive Media Development program do not have the energy or time to even pursue their dream careers. This is partly because of a lack of local work opportunities.

> If there [were] opportunities in town they could work or do placements [at] while bagging groceries or something to pay their rent, that would help build their portfolio. But if there aren't any opportunities like that, they are supposed to build their portfolio on their spare time but end up working service jobs or something full time to pay the bills and there's not much time or energy left afterwards to keep pursuing that other career and it's kind of sad to see. Unless you are willing to work really hard and you can afford to move out of town and maybe you're willing to take another one year program [to specialize in a skill], it's pretty hard to pursue that big dream when you're working at Future Shop and paying rent and maybe getting married. I do see students wanting to make a go of it and continuing to work on their portfolio, but I think it's really hard to do both. You're either [doing that as] your career…and there are opportunities if you're in a bigger city…or [it's] just all or nothing. You quit working and work full time on your portfolio and job hunt and you're willing to move. —Orion Atkinson

In many ways, this scenario is also familiar to most artists who attempt to simultaneously manage work, family responsibilities and an artistic career. For those who either do not want, or can't, move to larger urban centres in the south, there is a trade-off in that there are limited

opportunities in Northern Ontario to gain experience or learn from mentors within the field. This affects individual artists and organizations that attempt to develop and launch game projects in order to offer aspiring game developers and artists mentoring and experience. Art Fix in North Bay, as an example, wanted to design a program to support emerging video game artists, but they decided to partner with Hand Eye Society in Toronto to gain experience and to leverage their existing resources and capacity. (For more about Art Fix of Nipissing, see here.)

> To my knowledge, and the knowledge of everyone I've spoken to at Art Fix, there is currently no organization in the region that offers programming, training, or mentorship in video game arts. It's just a blank spot. And so when we wanted to design a program, an opportunity to change that, we had to go to Toronto. Yeah. Reaching out, you know, partnering with Hand Eye Society. Dames Making Games is another organization that we would like to bring into the project at some point, because they have a really interesting and social justice grounded perspective. But in order to build that capacity in the first place, we needed to partner with organizations in Toronto. It's an issue of local capacity.

> And so the project isn't just about creating an opportunity for two artists. It's also leveraging a train-the-trainer model, which is a way that we try and leverage our resources in so many different ways. So subsequent to their own professional development and their own development in their artistic practice the project that we're waiting for an okay from the OAC would also create a professional development opportunity for the artists to actually grow as facilitators, and as program designers in video game arts themselves. What that would mean is, at the conclusion of that project, we would have a qualitative shift in the art training capacity in the entire region. There's currently no one who's capable of, there's no organization, and

no single facilitator, who's able right now to lead to develop and execute on programming in this field. And even professional artists working at a high level don't have access to that kind of training. So, we're really excited about that twofold capacity building, both artistic capacity and also just qualitatively changing our ability to offer a fuller spectrum of our training opportunities to the community. —Rémi Alie[2]

Northern Ontario artists and developers would likely benefit from having support, various knowledge networks, and training to help them develop their practice and run a creative business. Orion Atkinson proposed "media hubs" that would supply necessary equipment, software, sites for work, and access to an industry expert or mentorship to local teams and individuals. This, in turn, could incubate the growth of indie and freelance companies. The concept is similar to the non-profit media arts program Digital Creator by the Near North Mobile Media Lab (n2m2l). Digital Creator provides communities across Northern Ontario with access to creative spaces outfitted with multimedia equipment, as well as an expert who conducts workshops and programming through libraries and other reputable establishments. (For a detailed look at equipment needs, equipment sharing, and other responses to similar needs, see here.) Atkinson believes that if a similar program were to be established in his town, and if it was focused on incubating game development projects, it could make a significant difference. (For more on regional ecosystems, see here)

> A media hub in Thunder Bay would be pretty neat. Having some sort of interactive media hub that will allow people to come in and experiment, extended reality tools, the software or interactive installations or video game production, or whatever… where you could use the equipment and have access to the studio space, that might make a big difference. That could be

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2 For more about Art Fix of Nipissing, see here. For a detailed review of mentorship and training in the region, see here.

some sort of incubator where maybe [artists and developers] could try starting their own businesses or do their own freelance work or something and collaborate with each other to create, but there also needs to be some sort of mentorship...companies or individuals with experience in the industry [being a part] of that kind of collaboration would be essential whether it's a membership structure, or [something else], I really don't know. But it could stimulate real economic growth if it was focused on incubating small companies, indie studios, freelancers, and actually create projects that they can promote and sell, like commercially viable products. That would help stimulate growth and create jobs and build the industry more in the North. I mean, that would be fantastic. —Orion Atkinson

As the Winnipeg examples demonstrate, and as evidenced by conversations with various individuals in the gaming field as part of this research, there is a productive cycle of influence, creation, and mentorship that happens when there are a range of supports, experienced professional artists, and at least one established artist-run centre or organization engaging with contemporary media arts practices. Digital Creator North (DCN), which has been aided by the stability and leadership provided by the Near North Mobile Media Lab, is an early, and successful, ongoing demonstration of the benefits of integrated support. The DCN labs are based in communities throughout Northern Ontario (some hosted by galleries, others by libraries) and have been influential for many emerging artists. (For more on media artist and drag performer, Jordan Fiddler, see here).

Chelsea Reid feels that the arts also connect to broader societal needs, and the broader community has a role to play in establishing a healthy arts community:

> Art is a core service and a community arts centre for every town should be [a reality] because it's like the Digital Creator

space—these [young artists] just need a safe place to go and having access to things like computers enable arts, as well as other professional endeavours, like making resumes and stuff like that. I think that we need other reputable stable institutions and organizations to take on community arts programming, whether it happens in a library, at the hospital, or between the two because I think that can create a form of stability and that arts are integral for the wellness of the society. —Chelsea Reid, *artist, author, curator, videographer, North Bay / Atikameksheng Anishnawbek*

Each community needs to define the structure of these relationships, such as possible equipment sharing or resource spaces, because no community across the region is the same and no one model can be replicated and be meaningful or relevant to all communities in the region. Digital Creator, for example, has a centralized administrative structure and a broad mandate to provide equipment and support for (primarily) youth in the communities. However, the establishment of each space in each community requires a great deal of relationship building, the ability of different sites to host, and the acknowledgement of the need for a range of different activities based on the participants in the community. The structures or services need to be flexible and able to change quickly and the communities need capacity to support space, administration and coordination responsibilities. It is important that the community values the relevancy of Digital Creator so that the community continues to offer the services over the long term.

Interview participants cautioned that while the intention of the media centres is to provide access to equipment rental facilities or to enable creators to work on projects, accessibility will inform whether it is a better use of resources to just provide individuals with their own equipment. Robin Harbron described an incubation program in Thunder Bay that had purchased a multitude of cell phones, likely for mobile development, but their location made them difficult to access. "They had all these different devices that you could test on," he recalls,

"but you couldn't ever get there, and they were all obsolete after a year or two."

Corey King, reflecting on the complexities of geographically dispersed communities and equipment lending programs, added:

> If we're regionally diffused people aren't going to drive all the way to [a larger town] to pick up a VR headset. And in fact, I always like these initiatives to get equipment into people's hands and companies always say that they want equipment. But I've seen [companies], get volumetric studios and all kinds of [equipment] and they fail because it's not there when you actually need it. And then somewhere there's some dusty [stuff] that's not being used. It costs hundreds and thousands of dollars, which is why I would rather give people the money and let them buy the headset. Ultimately, you can create barriers by offering things in a way that doesn't actually address the total problem. I am definitely still pro equipment [loaning], I'm just concerned about it not being a giant waste of money and only being accessible to people in [larger towns]. And can somebody dev on a computer for only two weeks then [return it] like a library book, and then get it back again? Does that work for people's workflows? I'm not even sure. —Corey King

Alternatively, Brendan Lehman shared the possibility of making equipment rentals and media workshops accessible to geographically distanced communities through an equipment vehicle and travelling workshop service similar to n2m2l in North Bay. Since 2006, the n2m2l has been using a retrofitted mobile home as an artist residency; the mobile is fully equipped with production equipment and editing suites. Artists are able to visit any community in the region for a project and offer workshops as part of the engagement. In addition, n2m2l has a video equipment lending program and ships the equipment around the region. Lehman feels that a similar service or program could provide northern communities, even those that lack an internet connection, a way to continue learning and gaining experience using multimedia equipment for their projects.

There are a range of complexities relating to accessibility, administration, ownership, and governance structures, and ongoing capacity in terms of communities or organizations establishing lending programs and other resource centres. In early stages, a network of game developers, designers, and artists can help with the foundational aspects of establishing a stronger integrative media ecosystem. They can network and build teams that might explore forms of resource sharing or address some of the various gaps regarding human resources or venture into collaborations on projects, mentorship, and support.

The Winnipeg example demonstrates that a recognized game development network or community infrastructure is often best for finding opportunities, events, support, and other gamers or creatives. However, Ontario's northern communities lack a strong and consistent network. Participants in the circles had a number of thoughts relating to how to utilize the resources that are available and build on them. It was noted among some participants that even the most isolated individuals, if they have an internet connection, can participate in discussions and online events. This is beneficial if participating in or hosting an online gaming collective. The interview participants agreed that the communication platform of choice for most online game development groups is Discord; it has streaming capabilities specifically developed for gamers, offers a customizable format, and enables different conversation topics to be organized into channels within a server.

> Discord is what every other studio I talked to seems to use. I assume if [the users are] game industry people, they should be somewhat tech-savvy, hopefully. If you can't figure out how to use Discord I think you've got a long road [ahead of you] to be able to develop games. —Corey King

It seems like most indie studios are using Discord for one thing or another, for communities and for internal communications. It seems like a good fit to me. —Kevin Smeltzer

A potential drawback of Discord is its searchability and the visibility of specific servers of interest to the gamer. As a result, reputable organizations often use their website to host their Discord server access link; this makes it easier to find through search engines like Google. Another shortcoming of a Discord server is that if it is not well-organized and regularly administered, conversations can become disordered and off-topic.

It's good that you can create different [channels] and create different locked rooms for different kinds of conversations. One thing I actually don't like about [a Discord server I participate in] is it is almost too open, like anybody can say [anything there]. And none of the executives and owners talk in there at all. If someone was managing it, to actually facilitate every different level of conversation, that's what can make it nice because you do talk differently to the entirety of the community than you talk to other devs or people who also are running studios. —Corey King

Network reputability stems from the development of a network associated with experienced, connected game developers, connection to established events or organizations, meaningful activities that are scaled as capacity increases over time, and clarity about goals and governance. Informal networks without activities or incentives and lacking leadership (whether traditional, collective, or otherwise) don't build energy and engagement.

Lehman pointed out that the Hand Eye Society (HES), a Toronto-based not-for-profit coalition of projects and people in support of Toronto's video game communities, was founded in 2009 by well-known

studio workers, and continues to be an important leader in the game community.

[They] worked at a bunch of different studios in town and just knew all the people and put them together. They held a social and organized an exhibition every so often is all it was really at the beginning. And then as they developed, [they] just got more into community development and became the organization that advocated for creating games as any other art and putting games in the art space. It's been a long fight to consider games in the creative space for the most part. —Brendan Lehman

Hand Eye Society also hosts many incentives to join their community, such as informing members about game development–related events, game jams, job opportunities, and other game development opportunities. As well, they actively share news on their website, social media accounts, and through their monthly newsletter, and they mentor and run programs that further support and educate game developers. As a result of their reputation and focus on the arts, they have been invited to collaborate and curate programs with a number of institutions and events including Nuit Blanche, Toronto International Film Festival, Toronto Comic Arts Festival, Toronto Symphony Orchestra, Toronto Long Winter, WordPlay Festival in partnership with the Toronto Public Library, and the Art Gallery of Ontario.

[Hand Eye Society] makes it feel like things are happening as opposed to wondering what people are up to...hear[ing] things through the grapevine of where to go to meet two or three people at a time and not have any of them [be] connected. —Brendan Lehman

It can be valuable for a network to be recognized and supported by reputable organizations and have collaborations with existing establishments. Brendan explained that the support given by the

Northern Centre for Advanced Technology (NORCAT) propelled the Northern Game Design Challenge (NGDC) event from existing as a party among Laurentian University computer science students to a serious and recognized yearly game jam run across Northern Ontario institutions. Corey further noted that by registering local game developer events with the International Game Developers Association (IGDA), they can be tied to a prominent organization with a mass following.

> It creates legitimacy and ties you into [an existing] network. By having an [IGDA] chapter you can go to [IGDA recognized] events where other people who run the chapters from other cities can show up. And that starts to create a network that expands beyond just where you are regionally. So there [are] practical effects just to doing it, but I also just think it has an officialness to it that is relatively easy to acquire [and it doesn't] seem like just a couple of guys started some board that they call "game north" or whatever. It's like this is a real organization that has a national region and this is the local chapter. —Corey King

Brendan felt that there are already some existing organizations that can help build and promote a regional network.

> I think MANO is pretty well connected to anyone who's trying to do [media work] beyond their own house. The Media Lab in North Bay would help get the word out to people who might be super far out there. They have connections with different Bands and [other communities] that they would drive their trailer to. It would help out a tonne, I'm sure.
> —Brendan Lehman

Corey advised taking advantage of local news providers as a simple way to further spread knowledge of a network in small communities:

> I think it's a good news story [and] until our industry got bigger [in Winnipeg], you could pretty much do hardly anything and get in the [Winnipeg] Free Press. People care about it. It actually doesn't have as much traction as you might expect but does legitimize it and gives us a story that you can share.
> —Corey King

The circle participants also advised individual game developers to attend or host game development events to strengthen personal networks. For instance, Robin Harbron and others noted the value of planning for and attending game development conferences, testing parties, and game socials in order to meet other game developers, to share new games, and work in progress, which can, as Brendan [Lehman] advises, "be super useful for moving projects along and getting inspired." Robin noted that he and others have gained both contacts and contracts through these events. Chelsea Reid observed the value in making contacts by contributing to local arts activities and making an effort to take on any compatible community opportunities.

> For me, it was being part of the arts community [that helped my network grow]. They used to have like gallery hops seasonally, and you go out and you look at art, and then you start running into people that you see maybe more and more. I think that being involved in the community and being part of boards is a huge thing to be able to network. And that's specifically because people do think of you when you volunteer your time.
> —Chelsea Reid

In addition, she accepts almost every opportunity she is presented with to keep a constant flow of work and new contacts:

> Even with [my previous well-paying job] I [wanted] to make sure that [I was still] networking. So, I started accepting other jobs and being on two boards. I've been fortunate enough for

the last three or four years to have been consistently employed in my field. But that's only because I accept everything, almost. —Chelsea Reid

The game developers interviewed concur that it takes persistence to build a presence in the sector, particularly in Northern Ontario. Ultimately, it takes training and mentorship, recognition, support, and sometimes collaboration with pre-existing organizations to create games and to build one's identity and reputation as a game developer.

Several colleges already have game arts programs. In September 2021, Cambrian College in Sudbury, launched the most recent program.

> This program is very forward-facing. Gaming is a billion-dollar industry on par with the motion picture sector and we know we can harness the creativity, programming talents and enthusiasm of students looking for an amazing career in this field.
> —Paula Gouveia, *Vice-President, Academic, Cambrian College, Sudbury*

> We know that there's a demand for this programming and for programming in this art form in the region. We know, anecdotally speaking, that video games are a huge part of the local culture. And we have really strong evidence of that from the North Bay Museum. It runs a really successful exhibition every year called *Game On*, where they bring in vintage video game consoles. When I spoke with the curator of the North Bay Museum, she was really excited about the opportunity to actually integrate original local video game artworks into that exhibition moving forward. So, we know that there's interest in demand in the context. —Rémi Alie

To build a stable sector and gaming ecosystem in the region requires strategic investments and programming as well as studio and game

development collaborations. Though Northern Ontario doesn't currently have a strong game development presence, there is potential for growing a local game development industry and communities. There are talented and determined artists and developers who can create games independently, in collaboration, or as employees or owners of a business, company, or organization. To be robust, a gaming ecosystem needs a network of training programs, game developers, mentorship and professional development opportunities, studios, and regular gaming events along with supported organizers and organizations with the capacity to develop and build these resources.

The creation and growth of companies, aligned with investments in the gaming ecosystem by various institutions of support, could have a strong impact on the advancement of the industry, as we also noted with the film case study (see here). The injection of investment dollars by NOHFC, for example, or other local economic development agencies, could induce positive economic developments, such as job creation and game sales. However, investors need to prioritize northern-controlled companies and support northern artists and the creation of games with stories that have meaning for communities in the region. This will foster the generation of games that are artistically and culturally relevant for northern audiences.

What these conversations suggest:

A range of strategies for individual designers and developers, institutions of support, and networks to help build a robust game development community in Northern Ontario:

- Examine and design an investment and seed strategy to help build a game development environment that supports new organizational development, equipment access, research and creation, formal and informal training and mentorship, and networking.
  - Strategies could include local multimedia development centres and/or mobile labs that host equipment, mentorship, or knowledge resources in order to incubate new freelance or indie media development companies.
- Boost the industry positively in a similar way to the film industry by offering economic incentives (e.g., better tax credits and property rates) and granting programs to help establish game studios and produce games in Northern Ontario.
- Develop dedicated work opportunities for game development.
- Develop a recognized network to connect locals and spread the news of opportunities, events, and support options.
- Establish a Discord channel for Northern Ontario game developers and designers. The process to establish a moderator/s and codes of conduct can help build foundational relationships to explore more capacity-heavy initiatives.
- Establish one or more official online Northern Ontario game development collectives to connect towns that are too small to host a game development community and create one or more recognized and safe online networks across Northern Ontario.
- Host, co-host, partner, establish new, and build on existing game development events such as game jams, conferences, and social events focused on bringing game developers together to participate in discussions or to work on collaborative projects.
- Develop game development volunteer and internship opportunities.
- Collaborate, partner, and connect with reputable organizations and industry professionals and with established sectors and faculties such as libraries and universities to host events and to create reliable contacts.
- Create professional game development knowledge resources and support programs and provide access to game developers.
- Provide local access to industry-standard equipment and software, whether through affordable memberships, equipment loaning programs, or equipment donations, and provide equipment funding that enables local game development.
- Establish relationships and support from reputable local or international media related organizations such as the International Game Developers Association (IDGA), Game Arts International Network (GAIN), and the Media Arts Network of Ontario (MANO).

PODCASTING, BROADCASTING + COMMUNITY RADIO:
LOCALLY CONTROLLED MEDIA + CREATION

ElizaBeth Hill (2020).

PODCASTING, BROADCASTING + COMMUNITY RADIO: LOCALLY CONTROLLED MEDIA + CREATION

People need to be asking if democracy is even working in cities like Thunder Bay, where local media is struggling.
—Ryan McMahon[1]

Indigenous Peoples in communities around the world have recognized the importance of locally owned and operated media as being crucial for self-determination, as well as a key tool to strengthen the use of Indigenous languages and other elements of their cultures. Indigenous communities in at least 81 countries have invested their own local resources to establish and maintain community-run media outlets. Many of these communities have chosen radio as the most practical medium.
—From a statement by Cultural Survival[2]

Undoubtedly the most important, influential, and followed podcast about Northern Ontario has been the five-part *Thunder Bay* longform series, broadcast by *Canadaland* in 2018. With almost two million listeners, Ryan McMahon (born in Fort Frances) provided an in-depth investigation into the deaths of Indigenous youth and the systemic racism endemic to the city. McMahon hosted its follow up, *Return to Thunder Bay*, in 2020.

Podcasting has become an important tool for Indigenous activists, storytellers, language teachers, artists, and others interested in sharing culture and shaping the narrative in Northern Ontario. For instance, the Thunder Bay Public Library is producing a series about residential schools, hosted by Robin Medicine. This podcast aims to shed light on the reality of the schools and their impacts.

Since 2014, the Indigenous Reporters Program (IRP), a project of Journalists for Human Rights (JHR), has been providing training in journalism and podcasting to support reporting on human rights and governance issues. As communicated on its website:

> IRP works to increase the quality and quantity of Indigenous stories and voices in media in Canada" and builds opportunities for Indigenous people to pursue careers in journalism, ultimately strengthening Indigenous voices in Canadian media, and trains non-Indigenous journalists on best practices for reporting on Indigenous stories to ensure stories are reported on accurately, frequently and informed. With better coverage, people across Canada can have a better understanding of Indigenous stories and the media can better reflect the diverse voices in the country.[3]

> I took an Indigenous journalism class, Journalists for Human Rights. We need to have representation from Indigenous voices. I had the time to do this, and I've already published two articles. I wouldn't have had the guts before. When you get asked to do something like this, a free opportunity and they will pay you…it changed my career. I'm surprising myself. It's wonderful. [4] —Michel Dumont, *Two-Spirit artist, Thunder Bay/ Lake Helen First Nation*

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1   See https://rrj.ca/whats-next-for-canadalands-thunder-bay-podcast/.
2   See https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/indigenous-communications-without-borders-indigenous.

3   See https://www.jhrindigenous.com/theprogram.
4   For Indigenous Disability Awareness Month, Michel wrote "On Tokenization, Funding and Being an Indigenous Artist Who Is Differently Abled," published by Canadian Art in November 2020. See https://canadianart.ca/essays/on-tokenization-funding-and-being-an-indigenous-artist-who-is-differently-abled/.

Prior to her involvement with JHR, Sarah Nelson, one of IRP's many Northern Ontario graduates, co-hosted a podcast series with Jayal Chung and Farah Ahmed, called *Bridging Resistance Radio*. This year-long limited series was made available online, at first only on Lakehead University Radio so it would drive traffic to the local university radio station.

> We basically wanted to highlight what we see, as people that are really engaged in trying to decolonize ourselves, trying to decolonize our communities as much as we can with our reach that we have. I just don't think we hear enough stories like that in mainstream media, right? So we wanted to make our own media. And that's the cool thing about it, is that anyone can do it. And that's so empowering as well because you get to hear different voices than you would in mainstream media.
> —Sarah Nelson, *Northwest Lead (Project Manager), Catalystsx, Thunder Bay*

For Sarah, podcasts are helping to clarify, illuminate, and encourage conversations about the realities of colonization and the unfolding of colonial processes in communities:

> I think that's kind of really lacking a lot of times. You learn about colonization, but you learn about it in this very, like broad, kind of abstract way, right? I think there needs to be more brought to learning about the colonization that actually happened here. Like *what* happened here? Because only now are we starting to…the Thunder Bay library has a project they're doing right now, a podcast where they're interviewing residential school survivors from the St. Joseph's Residential School, that's right here. So only now are those stories coming to light. There's a lot of backlash, like a lot of the white community is saying, "No, that wasn't a residential school. That was an orphanage." So that's happening right now. There is still

so much denial, because these things have not been brought to light for so long. It's gonna be really hard. Like, it's gonna be a really hard time. But the uncovering, you know, the shifting, it's all happening. —Sarah Nelson

These podcasts articulate and grapple with the processes that happen locally. They make use of the internet's breadth and the power of digital podcasting platforms in order to bring local complexities to the attention of a wide audience. The generic content provided by corporate broadcasters cannot provide that kind of investigative, exploratory, and revelatory examination that reflects the nuanced experiences of local communities.

Podcasting, like community radio, is highly accessible in terms of content creation and dissemination. It flattens the political and social hierarchies of mainstream reporting. Traditional barriers to hosting a show or broadcasting information through either airwave or print media—a background in journalism, the challenges of making pitches, or meeting the interests of editorial teams—are bypassed. The podcaster curates their own work, articulates their own stories, and defines their own meaning and audience. While some Indigenous podcasters, like Ryan McMahon and Tanya Talaga, are using these powerful platforms to bring widespread awareness to the ongoing legacy of racism and colonialism, others are motivated to use podcasting as a vehicle for language learning, story sharing and cultural transfer at the community-level. Sarah Nelson reflects that one of the reasons for the rise of podcasting is that the format "preserves our tradition of oral history":

> A lot of Indigenous people are using podcasts…yeah, there's quite a long list now of Indigenous podcasters. And the topics are so varied. And it makes sense, because it's like preserving our tradition of oral history, right? It's just another mechanism, another tool, another way. Yeah, and I think it's just a great way to actually share someone's voice, to really preserve their voices.

You know you're letting them speak for themselves.
—Sarah Nelson

Indigenous audiences that haven't seen themselves reflected in dominant media are seeing and hearing themselves in Indigenous podcasts and following them in increasing numbers. "I love podcasts. In fact, I find myself listening these days more to podcasts than I do music," says Erin Kennay, a Dokis band member who grew up in Ottawa.

> I have not started any podcasts yet but have always wanted to. I now see many of the Indigenous influencers starting them.
> —Dokis First Nation survey respondent

For Wendy A. Hamilton and others, the advent of social media and digital platforms has opened many possibilities for creating content:

> Perhaps now maybe the positive side of the pandemic is that something's going to come out of this if there's more and more ways to share our local arts and our local talent. There are many things that are happening, I think, in the media arts front that have changed radically over the last ten years or so, that are all positive. … In terms of the virtual platforms, the way I'm looking at it is very personal right now. I collect oral histories. It's volunteer, but it's dear to my heart. And now I can reach out to an author that's been gone from the Sault for years and who was raised here and wrote books about growing up here. I can reach him maybe and conduct an oral history and maybe turn it into a podcast, maybe get sponsorship, maybe monetize it. That's kind of cool. —Wendy A. Hamilton, *Sault Ste. Marie*

Wendy began her long career in media working in the 1970s at the local television station (CIJC/CHBX) in Sault Ste. Marie. Like radio, local stations provided an avenue for local content. These stations activated, and were activated by, their local communities. But now, says

Wendy, we've witnessed "the death knell of broadcasting as it was, and it can't go back." Up until the late 1980s, local and regional television was actively producing local shows and profiling local stories and talent; local people could pitch stories and find the equipment and support to produce local content.

> The only mandate they have from a regional perspective is to have X number of minutes in the news package. That's all they have. They have two people who are writing and shooting the commercials. There's a salesperson and two news reporters. They're always on the verge of never knowing when this is just going to be gone. And I think the whole mandate now is strictly that they make money from the advertising from this region. And our news package is our news package, right, we all get the same one. There's no room anymore. I could not go in and pitch a show, like I did with the children's television show, *Our Little House*, in 1988, and have it produced. There was a time when the amount of local programming that came out of these regional stations, a good ten to twelve hours of it, was often local programming between the news…from your local talk show that interviewed people from the various organizations and what was going on in the community to variety shows. And it may not have been an exchange of money, but it built a sense of awareness of the richness of the arts in the community. So, to see that all gone, it's hard to even describe to someone younger what that was like. And the cable company. I mean, when I worked at the TV station here in the 1970s there was another studio that was devoted to teaching kids how to run cameras, to do their own shows. And, as much as these community access channels try to fill that gap, it's not the same. Not everyone has a community channel, and it's a different mandate. So yeah, I think we lost a lot in that regard. —Wendy A. Hamilton

Through funding from CACTUS and their Local Journalism Initiative (funded through Heritage Canada), the Schreiber Media Centre was established to showcase and expose local issues and train community members to use media equipment.

That whole community concept [local media] actually comes out of the late 1960s with "Challenges for Change," when the National Film Board was going across the country and doing projects to encourage community groups. They would train people on how to use equipment and gave them a voice to look at ways to solve issues in their community. And they were quite successful with some of those films. I actually worked on one myself. That was a long time ago. You know, there were some films that came out of Thunder Bay as well. But that whole concept, really, is a very powerful affirmation for a community to give them the tools to solve some of their own issues.

It really is a very strong empowerment tool for communities. I mean, we have larger studios, or TV centres, but how much regional or local news actually floats to the top there? There's not a lot. So this way, like I said, the Schreiber Media Centre and the CACTUS Local Journalism Initiative program gives people a stronger voice and awareness in its way to create civic news, connect people, and network. And it's really amazing to hear some of the stories and people's reactions in the community to some of the issues that we have talked about.

The other issue that has been a problem for small media centres is the lack of funding. In the States, it was interesting because the cable companies in the 1960s and 1970s were actually legislated to give a percentage of funds to help those communities. We kind of missed that in Canada. We didn't go that route. I mean, there were cable stations like Shaw or McLean Hunter that actually set up community media, but there was really no way to

help smaller independent media centres. So, I think that's what CACTUS has been doing—lobbying with the government to try and get at least the definition of community media as part of some of the legislation that's being worked on right now.
—Donna Mikeluk, *Schreiber Public Library CEO and Schreiber Media Centre Board Director*

While the Schreiber Media Centre originally focused on covering important local news stories, they have been transitioning into storytelling and involving community members in this process. Their key struggle is capacity to support the short-term project Local Journalism Initiative (LJI) funding, and to find ways to continue the work post-funding. The LJI only funds wages for the journalist. Infrastructure expenses to support the journalist and the project are ineligible, which means the local host organization must cover costs such as co-ordination and administrative expenses, supervision, and a working space for the journalist and to house equipment. This lack of funding and capacity is significant, particularly because the Schreiber hosts had to form a new non-profit organization in order to even access the funding. Collaboration with the local library has been pivotal, but the library—a small library in a very small rural location—does not have the capacity to carry the project financially or administratively after the project is completed.

Donna Mikeluk, the librarian at the Schreiber Media Centre, noted how libraries are becoming increasingly creative about their mandates and the kinds of programming they offer communities. She feels that the Media Centre has an important role:

I think it's a great way for libraries to develop programming, for one. But unfortunately, most libraries are very small in Northwestern Ontario, they don't have the resources, the budget, and especially now with COVID, their budgets are getting reduced. And it's a real struggle. But again, this is an

opportunity, we're moving into technology, we have to think outside of the box. And it's a great opportunity to train people and get them involved in their community. So it takes a bit of a commitment...

The technology is just absolutely amazing, what you can do from home. But again, it's the training, but I think you still need to have that kind of connection, one-on-one initially, I think, to get people engaged in the whole process, I mean, it's just so creative. The possibilities of what people can do with media literacy are endless. That was one of the library's strategic goals was to look at ways of increasing media literacy. So this was a really good opportunity. I don't know if there are a lot of libraries in the North that would want to take this on, because you really do have to have a bit of understanding and be able to pull it together. But I think people can be very creative. And it's a great tool for us. We've been able to promote a lot of events that the library has done over the past year, and it's kind of nice to have a media studio that's going to help out and promote your library.

It's a lot of work to go through and incorporate. People can fundraise to keep the process going. But there are challenges for sure. Where would we set up? The space is limited in Schreiber, and rent….we couldn't do it. The Schreiber Media Centre could not do it without this partnership with the library.
—Donna Mikeluk

Community televisions and radio stations—including, for instance, Wiky TV that ran for many years out of Wiikwemkoong First Nation and Gimaa Radio 88.9 CHYF FM in M'Chigeeng First Nation— have partly filled in the gaps left by the disintegration of local public broadcasting over the last 20 years. Community radio maintains a commitment to curating content that has meaning to local listeners.

The Wawatay Native Communications Society supported the start-up of community radio stations across Northwestern Ontario in the 1970s. The transmitters of Wawatay Radio Network were also the only ones available to many of the 49 member communities of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN). While many of these community-based stations are no longer active, the content produced by Wawatay is distributed nationally by Bell Xpress View, and globally through digital streaming. The content reaches over 30,000 people living within the NAN and Treaty 3 areas. Wawatay has expanded to produce television content that is aired on APTN (Aboriginal Peoples Television Network). As is evident from the testimony of Fort Severn First Nation[5], local radio and television, created and produced within communities, was an important community-building tool; it reflects the experience of Indigenous stations worldwide:

> Community radio stations have questioned colonialism, and at the same time have strengthened the identities, cultures, and languages of Indigenous Peoples. Community radio stations have put forward the need and right for Indigenous communication as a tool for Indigenous Peoples' development, where conventionally communication was seen as a field where only professional journalists could participate.
> —Eva Tecún, *an attorney at Tz'ununija' Indigenous Women's Movement in Guatemala[6]*

Gimaa Radio was founded by Anong Beam in 2014 with funding through Northern Aboriginal Broadcasting—Indigenous Languages and Cultures Program. Anong's goal was to bring her father Carl Beam's dream of an Anishinaabemowin language station to life. Primarily sharing stories and language learning by hosts from the community, the

5 See http://fortsevern.firstnation.ca/node/138.
6 See https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/indigenous-communications-without-borders-indigenous?fbclid=IwAR18HbAG9iVSdTKl2sPhn21pJZkJIg_ifPzm4Qo_8L4-V3ihQqS-tmSLssg.

station has recently expanded to sharing news through a partnership with the local newspaper, *The Manitoulin Expositor*. Anong originally pitched the idea to CBC, but their audience was too small for the scale of the CBC. She realized that Gimaa's audience was "hyperlocal"— evidenced by the size of the audience, the interest in local news, local connections, and most importantly, a hyperlocal dialect, with distinct differences between Anishinaabemowin spoken in communities across Manitoulin and the North Shore. The station began working with *Expositor* staff writer Michael Erskine, who writes short synopses of lead local stories which are translated live on air by host Eric Hare. For Anong, the station and its efforts help address the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: "Indigenous people have and need the right to be in control of their own media."[7]

The hyperlocal nature of community radio factored into the conversation circles hosted by Makenzie Dokis with members of the Dokis First Nation. (For more detail on their podcast efforts, see here.) Many of the participants expressed their interest in a podcast station, but the combination of terrible bandwidth and concerns about the online platforms making their stories and teachings too widely accessible, prompted them to consider radio. While many community stations, like Gimaa, choose to stream online, there is the option for the venture to be low tech and available only on a local over-the-air frequency.

For many communities, the power of digital platforms is attractive. Podcasting is an accessible medium (within areas that have good bandwidth) that allows podcasters to cover stories that aren't receiving attention. They can reach community audiences who are new, broader, local, and shared. The podcasts are accessible for the podcasters, and they are accessible for audiences—they appear on multiple platforms, like Apple, Spotify, Instagram, and Facebook, as well as on curated stations.

Speaking from his background in broadcast, both television and radio, Erin Kennay notes:

> From a radio or broadcast or podcasting perspective, it's so great, because all you really need is a half decent microphone. Whereas with a lot of other broadcasting you need a lot more tools and a lot more production. I loved radio. We would just have simple, you know, get your mic, do your interviews, chop and edit your audio. And there's tons of programs for that, that are really user friendly. And you know, I think for a young, a younger audience, it makes it quite easy.
> —Erin Kennay, *educator and former journalist, Vancouver*

It should be noted that digital spaces are not always safe, and while the digital has increased access to many people, access to digital spaces can come with a new set of problems, such as dealing with caretaking and protecting cultural knowledge (for more on these aspects see here and here), pushback on politically charged podcasts, or for being a woman in gendered space.

> I have always been open to technology and have had my own podcast with my husband, Dave, since 2004. *Broca's Area Podcast* became *Broken Area Podcast* later. Because the tech world is male dominated, Dave continued his podcasting with friends for years and has tons of podcasts: *The Marshall McLuhan Variety Hour*, *Best Episode Ever*, *Dave Brodbeck's Psychology Lectures*, etc. I continued doing the *Broken Area Podcast* with him because he is there and shields me from the haters. I also did my own podcast for a while with a male friend, That's not Art, and that was a learning curve. —Isabelle Michaud, *mixed-media artist and podcaster, Sault Ste. Marie*

The extremely high listener numbers for Ryan McMahon's podcast on *Canadaland* has to do with two main factors: he had high visibility and

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7   See https://www.manitoulin.com/the-expositor-partners-with-gimaa-radio-to-provide-news-services-in-anishinaabemowin/.

a following prior to the podcast as a social commentator and comedian and he is respected for his strong and relevant reporting. The platform Ryan used to reach audiences is also an important aspect of his podcast's reach. *Canadaland* provides a centralized platform with dedicated staffing that curates, promotes, and engages audiences; the Thunder Bay podcast was picked up by NPR, CBC, and Indiewire. For podcasts that want and need a wide audience, a platform like *Canadaland* makes a huge difference in reach. Ryan's efforts to establish *Makoons Media* and the *Indians and Cowboys* podcast platform takes this into account.

Wendy A. Hamilton spoke to the importance of infrastructure and reach:

> I think that festivals, broadcasters, anybody that can provide an infrastructure that allows people to create, and have it be seen…everything lends itself to it being part of the image and the identity of a community. If you want it to be just steel and hockey, that's an easy thing to do. Because you build a giant arena where people gather to go and watch a hockey game, you need that infrastructure, you need the support, you need the people to help you get it out there and be seen. The whole aspect of all social media is we're all just talking to ourselves. I don't know how that will evolve. I think Borderline [Radio] is a possibility because I think they can reach a broader demographic and a broader component of the community. I'm sure that every second person I talked to right now still hasn't heard of Borderline, and wouldn't know how to connect to it, because it's not a roll across the dial to find it.
> —Wendy A. Hamilton

Podcast platforms and community radio stations continue to struggle with sustainability and how to reach audiences, particularly within the breadth of the internet and the deluge of available content. Podcast stations can help find a niche and audiences through their curatorial focus, leading to a catchment of listeners. But some podcasters, like Wendy, aren't sure whether it's possible to recover the kind of activation that local television, community cable and radio provided in the 1970s and 1980s.

> I work with two of the producers at Shaw on independent projects. I know that their intent is to find great stories and help people produce their own stories. And so certainly the intention is there, but it just doesn't seem to be the same. I would feel it inappropriate for me to try and put words to that, there was a time when I fought hard to have a lot more arts coverage on the community channel. I volunteered there for a bit and produced a few segments, and I just found that it just didn't seem to open the door the same way it used to. Maybe it's just seeing your local dance company come in and stage a show for a particular event, or all of those kinds of things, the day-to-day talk. And that brings us to Sault Online and their effort to have On TV to try and fill that gap. The difficulty in that is, you can't go back. I think we just don't know if it would be community building in the way that we are talking about because again, we're just talking to each other in these digital spaces. I don't know if that is going to lend itself to building that sense of awareness within the community.
> —Wendy A. Hamilton

Garnet Angeconeb, an Elder from Lac Seul First Nation, worked for CBC and Wawatay in the 1960s and 1970s. He reflected on these experiences and offered some words about the importance of balance in the use of technology and digital platforms, and being "care full" (for more about these ideas see here and here):

> I used to go to the northern fly-in communities before the time of the air strips and telephones. Very isolated. It was an awesome time to see how these communities came together in their environment. Didn't have outside distractions. Traditional

way—I mean they lived day to day to survive. We can look at that, where we come from. I'm talking about 40 years ago now. And I was involved in communications development in places where there were populations of 500. We helped to bring in CBC services—radio and television basically—a national service that everyone took for granted, but in the North we didn't have it. I saw that concern for the Elders. What impact will it have on our Elders, our languages, our culture…will we be changing the way we exist? In many ways we were challenged with: how do we counterbalance the advent of television and radio services? We began to see community radio stations. We were told, "Bring all this in but don't lose our culture because that's the basis of our existence." Those threats have run away on us now. We have lost control. Everybody is sitting there with the scrolling devices. What does this do with our ways, especially our young who are losing their language, the stories of kookom and mishomis and so on.

And once again here we are with some threats at our doorstep, and that's technology. So I go back to what the Elders said: It's okay, we can't stop the technology from coming into our lives and so, what do we do to hang on to what we have? Enhance our stories, and our languages, and recordings of our knowledge and traditional teachings, and so on. And what the Elders said was use the tech that we have and use it wisely because it can be a threat and be used against us. In our own way, meet the challenges of our Elders so we don't erode our teachings, use our modern-day tech to our benefit. How do we frame that? I use the word resilience—using whatever means we can. We can use modern-day tech to sustain and maintain what the creator has given us. How do we frame that? I'm sure other Indigenous societies around the world are facing the same challenges, the same threats. We need to think about the word *Aya gomisiwin* "be careful." That's what I would tell young people today.
—Garnet Angeconeb, *Elder and former broadcaster,*
   Lac Seul First Nation

What these conversations suggest:

Hyperlocal: Activating hyperlocal spaces is an effective podcasting and radio strategy for some communities, as a way to provide culturally relevant, community-focused content creation and curation. Simultaneously, this hyperlocal focus defines a particular audience, even if the station is streaming digitally and can be accessed farther afield than a community radio frequency. Podcasters addressing broad social issues, and reaching broad audiences by streaming online, are also sometimes taking what might be called a hyperlocal approach, by focusing on how complex social issues are experienced within a particular community.

Hybrid approaches: Podcasting and broadcasting can contribute to community engagement and community building, and cultural knowledge transfer. These are powerful, accessible tools for investigative journalism. What many people note, however, is that these digital tools cannot entirely replace on-the-ground/analogue experiences in the community. Language learning, cultural transfer, performance, and other cultural activities need direct human to human, land-based and/or location specific sharing which are the primary platforms from which digital podcasting and radio emerge. And, when shifting into, or using digital platforms, care must be taken in the dissemination and protection of cultural knowledge.

Importance of curated content and locally produced content: The dominance of centralized, corporate broadcasting delivery has dramatically shifted the dynamics of community-based content creation, community building, cultural animation, and talent building (both artistic and technical) that formerly were stimulated by cable channels, community radio and television stations. Similarly, audience attention has shifted with the prevalence of major streaming platforms and access to other digital spaces beyond the radius of a community frequency. It's not clear how, or if, that kind of energy and participation

can be achieved through podcasting and community radio. Most participants, however, are excited about the possibilities of podcasting: its accessibility, relatively low tech and equipment requirements, and capacity to reach audiences on a number of scales. It is clear that curated platforms are important in their capacity to carve out audiences within the scope of the internet. Strategic investments are needed to support community podcasting, radio, and documentary production—with equipment, training, and funding to support wages for both creation and administration.

Capacity: Most participants appreciate the openness of podcasting and community radio which not only allows, but encourages "citizen participation," but emerging and non-professional podcasters need support to learn how to podcast. Similarly, although it's clear that podcasting platforms are important channels to support individual podcasts and podcasters and can provide targeted support for emerging podcasters (as Makonse Media hopes to do), the capacity to do this work may not be there. There is a need for avenues for non-professional, emerging and professional content creators, and platform providers, to have support: in making and disseminating their work, learning the trade, and engendering a new generation of content creators, particularly those from marginalized, Indigenous and BIPOC communities. Micro grants for laptops, microphones and earphones, podcasting workshops, website development, social media marketing and other dissemination strategies would help build a strong podcasting ecosystem in the region. For instance, the *Storykeepers* podcast launched in 2021 by Waubgeshig Rice (Wasauksing First Nation) and Jennifer David (Chapleau Cree First Nation) received support through an Ontario Arts Council Indigenous Arts Projects grant to build their website, hire a graphic designer to design the logo and to commission a musician to create the podcast theme song. Generally, however, most granting programs do not allow for these kinds of project expenses nor do they fund web or podcast series, which makes it difficult for emerging podcasts to receive funding. Podcasters may need to explore

other ways to support their podcasts, such as through fundraising campaigns, or if they can make a business case, through economic development funds. Podcasts with a creative spin, or that focus on arts and culture, may have some success applying for arts funding for discreet projects rather than a long-term series, and may have some success with program streams like the OAC Audience and Market Development fund. Arts funders might consider expanding program funding to accommodate arts-based podcasts, such as *Storykeepers*, or podcasts created to provide augmented creative experiences for listeners.

While Heritage Canada funding for the Community Journalism Initiative has injected energy into local broadcasting and spread into creative applications, the fund does not cover the administrative costs associated with launching and managing a program. This substantial responsibility falls on already underfunded and under-capacity local organizations. To support a viable and long-term ecosystem of creative podcasting, storytelling, and local journalism, the LJI program might consider expanding resources and funding to cover infrastructure costs, expand the length of the funding, and explore how to support organizations to transition the program, post-funding; in addition, added flexibility regarding the definition of journalism, and allowing the hire of collaborative or collective teams, could boost the impact of the podcasting and journalism in the region.

BORDERLINE RADIO:
PODCASTING FROM THE
HYPER-LOCAL

Adrian Vilaca, *The Borderline* (2020). Photo: Borderline Radio

BORDERLINE RADIO:
PODCASTING FROM THE HYPER-LOCAL

> We're hyperlocal, hypersonic. I recognized immediately that the media, and the internet has given everybody an opportunity. The irony of the whole situation is the bigger it gets, the more opportunity there is in the niche markets. And you got to get smaller to get bigger. That's the way it's going to work.
> —Vilaca, *Borderline Radio, Sault Ste. Marie*

Adrian Vilaca, a music promoter in Sault Ste. Marie, was passionate about the music talent in this small Northern Ontario city and aware of the need to reach audiences through a curated venue. Since launching Borderline Radio in 2020 (just before COVID), the radio station has been focusing on the small to get bigger.

Vilaca carefully observed the trends in broadcasting that had transformed highly local, community-driven news into "canned" segments aired by stations across the region and, sometimes, the country.

> There's a great model here in the Sault called *Soo Today*, published by Village Media. Village Media began, really, as a website design business. And then it transformed into a news outlet and an online news outlet. It had great success going against big media—the *Sault Star*, CTV, CBC—because as those got bigger, our local news would only get a minute. We used to have 30 minutes of local news back in the day, and then with the whole thing going corporate and conglomerate, less and less local news was being broadcast. And so, *Soo Today* was finding success in this street level, if you will. And they had, essentially, a podcast. So they were dealing with the news, the weather. Obituaries really drive that whole business at the end of the day. And the obituaries, ironically, I was thinking, wow, they have

a great audience. One thing about the Sault is that people that leave the Sault continue to stay in touch.

Vilaca realized that the interest in obituaries wasn't just a morbid fascination, but an indication of connections that people maintain with Sault Ste. Marie. Many of *Soo Today*'s readers are "expats" of the city; they live across the country and around the world. *Soo Today* was able to engage this wider community through a local–digital relationship. Vilaca felt there was potential to invigorate this sense of connection to a geographically specific place through the very animated local music scene that struggles to become visible and develop an audience within the massive space of the digital world. There is a lot of local talent, but the musicians struggle with traction: "Seven hours to get to Toronto, and how're you going to break into that market?" says Vilaca.

Vilaca sees Borderline Radio as a way to both champion and build community. "What they're [mass media] not doing is paying attention to, really, the heart and soul of every city, the arts, the culture, the entertainment, that's really where every city builds its foundation, its community." Vilaca began by researching podcast stations and diligently growing his Sault Ste. Marie music collection. He initially found podcasts profiling New Orleans and a New Orleans sound, then a music podcast based out of Edmonton. He contacted the podcaster who'd been developing the Edmonton music podcast for over seven years and who had a playlist of 105 Edmonton-based musicians. Vilaca wanted to showcase musicians in Sault Ste. Marie, and other talent in the region, to promote the local music scene.

> At that point [at the time of contacting the podcaster in Edmonton], I was at about 150 of Sault Ste. Marie, and we're 75,000 people, not a million. And then the light really came on. I said, "Wow, I feel like there's so much more." I'm approaching 450 now, of artists that have a Sault connection that we're playing that have recorded. I thought, well, let me try Sudbury. I

meet the promoters there. And they couldn't come up with a list of more than a couple of dozen. I go to Timmins; they couldn't even come up with ten. I started seeing, well, this is unique. So my first idea of just developing a radio station suddenly took off.

Vilaca's original plan was to build a presence for local musicians and then use this platform to connect the musicians with promoters in a variety of cities. While the number of podcasts and podcasters has grown exponentially in recent years—as a method to reach audiences when live shows weren't possible (particularly during COVID)—there are few curated podcast stations. There is one podcast station in Thunder Bay, but it primarily functions as a marketing platform to profile the city; it is one of a limited few in Northern Ontario.

Vilaca aims to use an owned digital platform to elevate the presence and visibility of the arts. Community radio and local television stations have always showcased local shows and talent; owning the platform is key to the creation and curation of creative work within local communities. With this as a strategy, Borderline Radio provides, enables, and is committed to hosting a platform for local content and the circulation of local music. Borderline aims to highlight a distinct local sound and encourage local listeners (and those connected to the Sault) to engage with it through the podcast. This is a localized alternative to how stations with broad mandates tend to play music with broad appeal and higher ratings that then inform and influence local tastes while, simultaneously, flattening local talent and content.

Vilaca had to figure out how to establish space in the digital sphere so that local musicians become known, connect with one another, and foster audiences from within both local and artistic communities.

> The problem was, why are we not going to see the arts? We have all of these artists, why are the halls empty? Why are the bars empty?

I had recognized in our city that we have a huge arts community. But we have a massive gap between them and the audience. I was struggling to find why we weren't putting bums in the seats. At all of these events we have a crazy number of artists. So here I am thinking, we have artists—I didn't realize then to the extent that I do now—we're super unique, what we have here, very unique. So now I'm even more excited about this whole project, because I've uncovered something that I don't think anybody, anybody here even, really recognizes in our city.

Ken Danby told me that the world had lost its way because the education system has failed us by neglecting the arts. And then the right side of the brain can only be taught one way. It's the arts, because there's no other way. You cannot learn intuition without the arts. You cut out the art class, they cut off the gym class, because he considered athletics, an art. And we've gotten away and it's about science, math, and all of that. And the problems in our world are directly related to the neglect of the arts. And that stuck with me huge. And so COVID has probably enlightened people that they're important. Suddenly, this is the arts: social media, podcasting, and how you present artistically, relates to your income. And so the arts have a role and you're seeing the political levels understand the economic engine that the arts and culture have, instead of putting it off.

So, I thought that I'd establish a pilot here in the Sault. I ended up calling it The Borderline for a handful of reasons. But we're on the border, essentially. —Vilaca

The station physically sits on the geographical border of Canada and the US, and, digitally, on the border of the local and global. It functions in the space between artist and audience and operates between digital and analogue forms. Over time, Vilaca hopes the station reaches audiences

in a range of locations and draws more people into physical venues, through the digital, to support local musicians.

> As the world has gotten bigger, the opportunities are in the shrinkage. You have to go into the hyper niche. So, big deal, you're on Etsy. That guy who likes you is halfway across [the world]. Now you got to send it there. How about that person over there who bought a new house and wants a housewarming gift, where there's a wedding going on? And you just want a local artist now, knowing who they are, and being able to go to a marketplace for that. And so, that's what we're trying to do here and that's phase two, the video part, I'm just at the very beginning of that. —Vilaca

Vilaca is keenly aware of the importance of the digital to promoting artists at a global scale, but he's also aware that the digital space is increasingly important for promoting the local and making it visible. Borderline Radio's primary audience are those connected to Sault Ste. Marie, whether geographically or otherwise. This informs its approach—it generates a geographically, artistically, and socially local audience.

Other curatorial projects have a different relationship to online platforms and venues. Between Pheasants Contemporary (BPC) has a very lively relationship with curators, artists, and audiences through Instagram. (For more on BPC, see here.) BPC aims to showcase diverse work that engages with other work and artists at a range of scales, unlike Borderline Radio, which primarily wants to build the profile of local artists. Images of artwork exhibited at BPC are seen by a smaller local audience compared with its Canadian and international followers. Borderline Radio's audience is by definition local, and Vilaca hopes the visibility that musicians gain through the station can help them book live shows. He realizes that mainstream media wasn't providing that kind of promotion for musicians to become more prominently known.

The motivation of it was to really take a couple of steps back to promote shows that I was going to do. So I was going to create my own media arm. And this way, I wouldn't have to go to the mass media, mainstream media, and I would just create my own media and promote the shows I was going to do. And it grew from there as I started uncovering all kinds of things.

I want musicians to send their recordings to us, any information at all, reach out, we will play it, bring them on, get their story, give them their web page. You know, as I booked all of these artists [as a promoter], it should be a slam dunk. If I bring somebody here, I should be able to go to Timmins, North Bay, Sudbury, and create a mini-circuit for the Frank Deresti's of the world. You know, Frank has done it because he's high-level talent. But it should be automatic. And we have to use Frank's knowledge. And Dustin Jones, and these kinds of guys. If you're gonna bring somebody in, let's automatically set up a mini-tour. They're gonna come here for a week and we got them five shows.

I've been a promoter since I was a kid, and an agent for various artists. Of course, times have changed radically since the late twentieth century and into the twenty-first. As a promoter, I was finding it, one, very costly to advertise any shows. And then, secondly, even if the money was there, it wasn't highly effective, at least not here. Because it was scattered. The media is so scattered now. It wasn't like the old days where, "Okay, I'm gonna put it out now in the *Soo Star*" and everybody reads the paper. And it's done. Or I'll just go to that genre radio. And that's done. Now it's the mishmash. —Vilaca

This "mishmash" Vilaca refers to is not only the range of platforms an artist has to navigate and manage to be discoverable on, but also to the largely unfocused, uncurated aspect of the content and the makers.

There are all kinds of podcasters. But they're not centralized. The information was so scattered that the audience had a hard time finding it. It wasn't in one place. It's one thing to put yourself on Spotify, on Amazon, you're a minnow in the ocean. Again, just using the musician, we need to build your tribe in your backyard. Great, go on Spotify. But let's build an audience. Your next-door neighbour probably doesn't even know you released the record last week. And we need to correct that. That's what we need to do here. Let's build a tribe, right here on Main Street, on Queen Street. And that is what's happening here.

The battle that so many of these people would have is, okay, great, create a podcast, how do I get people to listen to it? Where do I put it? And that's the Spotify, Amazon, iTunes, Apple thing. And I'm like, where's the backyard audience? I mean, that's what you're preaching to here. And that niche was missing. —Vilaca

Vilaca has promoted musicians for decades and has connections to networks in the music community. He hasn't had to market the station; people find Borderline Radio because of a developed and evolving ecosystem of local community members, expats, and other social connections. Borderline Radio is discoverable by being hyperlocal.

I'm getting great feedback from the artists. They all love to hear their music played on whatever kind of radio station it is. That's a supercharge in itself. I think everybody gets that—the bridge to the audience to get the numbers. It's one thing to put it on a playlist and play it. It's another to have people actually listen to it. So, I think they all understood that, and it is a slow build. We're 14 months in. But I would say the answer is yes, the artists have definitely got on board. And they are seeing it. Are their sales up? I would probably say no, but obviously, COVID. And what I'm doing, there's a lot of things that nobody's really

understanding what is happening, but they see the picture. And the critical acclaim, if I could put it that way, it's been really good. The fact that you're even speaking with me is already something that the artists would get excited about. You know, CPAC has given me a call. And I've gotten some feedback from certain other media that are intrigued by the whole concept. And the fact that you can actually do it in a city of 75,000. And that there's that large of an artistic community that you can create a 24-7 station, and a media site that relies only on local music—I like to say we're hyperlocal, hypersonic.

It's very organic. 100%. Yeah, it's organic. —Vilaca

Vilaca has had a steep learning curve. He has had to learn all aspects of podcasting, including how to manage a station as well as understand the technical components that relate to audio, cameras, recording, and editing. If there had been a program at a local college, he says he would have benefitted from that kind of training. (For more on education, training, and mentorship, see here.)

I'm only a year on broadcasting. And I have zero, zero media experience. I never worked at a radio station, TV station, communications company. Of course, the internet levels the playing field, and everybody is a professional.

One of the biggest challenges that we all have as podcasters is that fear of not being smart enough, or too many umms, too many uhrs, too many uuuuhs. And that's one of the charms of podcasting. The listener, turns out, they like that. They like f-bombs, and they like stuttering, and they like people stumbling. There's an audience for that, go figure. Got that down in spades. So, so much of it is finding the right people, empowering them, encouraging them that all of these things are, you got the knowledge and knowledge is useless unless

you share it. And this is the way we share it in the twenty-first century. It's the world of the computer. So, if you really want to make a mark, and share your story, in your case, First Nations and your case, the books and the authors, podcasting is the thing. —Vilaca

Vilaca initially just wanted to promote the musicians he worked with and was looking for a platform to do this meaningfully. The station started as an idea that soon became a much larger proposition. He realized that other artists in the community needed a curated digital venue to share their work and become visible to other artists and audiences. Borderline Radio has expanded into covering the local literary and visual arts scenes; these spaces are hosted by an increasing number of local podcasters and appreciated by a growing audience. Sometimes it takes a platform to show local audiences the value of the content in their own communities.

> We're getting music lovers that…and again, this probably happens everywhere…people in their own towns just fluff off the local artists, right? Nobody's good enough. Bob Dylan got booted out of Minnesota, had to go to New York, that kind of thing, you know. And that happens everywhere. That's just a fact of life. And so we're trying to build an audience for our artists here. And the artists, I think they're on board with the whole deal. COVID is on board with the whole deal, if I can put it that way. And we're seeing results. I'm really excited about what's going to happen. —Vilaca

What this conversation suggests:

- A targeted and curated digital platform can create increased opportunities for audiences to find local artists, even if initially local artists by local audiences.

- Local ownership of digital platforms ensures that the local is visible. Local ownership has community connections that tend to promote local talent and build reciprocal ecosystems; large broadcasting companies do not have the same community relationships or commitments to prioritize the local.

- As we've learned elsewhere, there are complex relations between the local and the digital. Local and regional circulations can gain additional traction through digital exposure.

- As more artists turn to the digital platforms or online audiences, particularly podcasting, as a way to build audiences and to share their experiences, work, and stories that aren't covered elsewhere, it may be beneficial for a range of support to be considered. These include training and mentorship programs, micro-grants from local municipalities, expansion of eligibility by economic development corporations, and the recognition of podcasting as an important audience development tool within arts council funding programs.

DOKIS FIRST NATION: KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER ON THE GROUND + IN THE DIGITAL

Nadine Arpin, *Anna Lisa* (film still) (2017). Directed by Nadine Arpin, produced by Rachel Garrick.

DOKIS FIRST NATION:
KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER ON THE GROUND + IN THE DIGITAL[1]

Gord speaks of that knowledge transfer. When Gord was young, I don't remember the exact age, he said he started guiding, he might have been 12, as young as 12 years old. And he would sit around the campfire. And he grew up listening to the old generation at his time. I'm not sure, but that would be three, four, four, or five generations ago now, right? How many years back do those stories go? And they're telling stories of what they were told when they were young. So, essentially, what Gord was saying during that interview is that, when they were out hunting, and he was young, he would listen to the old folks sitting around a campfire, all of the stories and that knowledge transfer, that that's how he learned everything that he knows, he knew at that time. So, the important thing, to try to relate it to digital media, is preserving that history, that knowledge for future generations as well. So digital media, kind of, I would say, replaces the campfire. It's always there. It's always available. Anybody that wants to know, should be able to access that information at any time.
—Randy Restoule, *Dokis First Nation*

I feel like some of the podcast ideas that we should try and use should be about our First Nations history. We should try to put it in a way that is interesting for people of all ages to listen to. Put in some stories that can be passed down with the next generation, and the next generation after that. I feel like we should be able to share the history with not only the Dokis First Nation members, but the people who are there as guests and want to learn about some of our history. They do have a museum in Dokis, but, as of right now, they can't really go because of COVID.
—Kelli Armstrong, *16-year-old member of Dokis First Nation, Toronto*

Makenzie Dokis, a young Band member who lives off-reserve, hosted three conversation circles and organized two surveys, one for adults, one for youth, as part of the community insights that inform the research for this project. Participants lived in Dokis or in other parts of Ontario and the country, off-reserve. A range of participants from the Dokis community participated, including the Chief, parents, teenagers, and Elders.

Fellow Band member Erin Kennay grew up off-reserve and had less familiarity with his Indigenous heritage than some of the other circle participants. During the youth circle that Makenzie facilitated, Erin, and others, considered the importance of sharing history; he was keen to talk about the possibilities of launching a Dokis community podcast or radio station. Erin felt those platforms would contribute to language preservation and learning as an extension of oral practices:

> That's a really important thing to remember, is preserving those languages or teaching them like…learning the new word or understanding what that lineage or background is. That's something you can do with podcasting or radio broadcasting. Because it's built around language and speech and all those types of things. So that's something that I think is definitely worth focusing on and preserving.
> —Erin Kennay, *educator and former journalist, Dokis Band Member, Vancouver*

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1 This section was a collaborative effort between Sophie Edwards and Makenzie Dokis. Makenzie facilitated the circles, designed the surveys, and determined which questions she wanted to ask the participants. She provided a summary of the sessions, along with a recorded debriefing with Sophie; Makenzie and Randy Restoule also reviewed the case study.

Reflecting on the process and the conversations, Makenzie noted that the majority of the youth survey participants, like Erin, lived off-reserve, and that all of the adult survey respondents were also off-reserve members. She attributed this to two factors: first, that it is generally difficult for off-reserve community members to be involved in community activities but that, like her, they also desire connection and wish to be engaged; second, that the online surveys enabled them to share their experiences and ideas.

> I've been waiting so long to be able to have people that are off-reserve to be involved. I think that'd [podcasting] be a great way that would get a lot of people off-reserve into it. That's why I put the survey out, saying this is for Dokis First Nation members, not saying off-reserve, on-reserve. I think that helped, because I got Erin [Kennay] from Vancouver. And it was like, holy, you are Dokis First Nation, but you're over there. Most of the time, they're like, "Nope, can't be, because you're in Vancouver…." We're here, we're off-reserve, it shouldn't matter, we still want to participate. —Makenzie Dokis

Typically, the Band provides in-person cultural programming on-reserve, and despite their pivot to digital forms, the promotion of events continues to reach members through their prior involvement or through the Band's Facebook page. Another survey respondent agreed with Makenzie's experience, "[I] live off-reserve and am told [I] cannot participate in projects because [they are] only for on-reserve members." Many First Nation communities have high off-reserve membership: people who have left for work or other personal reasons, who have been impacted by the 60s Scoop, or who have been impacted by the assimilative disenfranchisement of Indigenous women who married non-Indigenous men prior to Bill C-31 and the amendment of the Indian Act.

> It'd be great to have more of that [canoe trips, tanning and beading workshops, and other cultural activities]. But that's the hard part too. When you live off-reserve, you don't hear about things compared to when you live on reserve. So, I think that would be a great idea, but also to share that outside. —Makenzie Dokis

Makenzie and the youth circle linked the wider Dokis community's desire for connection to the possibilities of offering a hybrid analogue/digital approach to link Dokis members who live on, and off, reserve. They recognized that combining physical and digital options could eliminate some barriers, such as geographical distances, that separate Band members. Analogue or physical programs could continue to support the Band members who value hands-on, land-based and in-person teachings, but digital methods could enable Band members living off reserve, and others unable to attend on site, to join in during or after specific engagements or activities.

> They [would] also feel involved and aren't left out. I just joined the Dokis [Facebook] group this year. I didn't even know there were two of them. So I joined and I'm seeing all these really amazing things like the Standing Bear [virtual] camp. I was like, Oh my god, I'm gonna take this next year, until I'm 25, because it was so meaningful to actually learn more about your culture. And I was so mad, like, why don't I join this sooner? —Makenzie Dokis

The experience of Kelli, a 16-year-old Band member who lives outside of Toronto, aligns with Makenzie's observation. Kelli joined virtual instructional circles offered by other communities and organizations. The circles offer beading and painting programs that are supported through the provision of supplies and a community kitchen program that teaches traditional food preparation.

The community's reliance on digital platforms during the pandemic has opened possibilities. Ogimaa (Chief) Gerry Duquette concurs with these digital directions and the capacity of the digital to be inclusive. While he recognizes that digital experiences are not an exact replica of the on-site and in-person experience, he observes that the value of the digital is that it offers experiences that are meaningful for those creating the content and for those witnessing or participating online.

> We have a lot of drummers and singers that maybe are just quiet right now. Or maybe they are too shy. I think the other part of media is to be inclusive to everyone. Whether you're on- or off-reserve, whatever you disclose, or how you want us to be comfortable with that, doesn't matter to me. You're a member, just like me, it shouldn't matter. Recently I've seen some [people] are having their round dances online. And I know there's the spiritual part of it, you may not be able to show when you're doing your pipe ceremony at the beginning, but you see them online and it's kind of just them dancing on their own and you appreciate it, you still see that spirit from them. Being open and you know, enjoying it. You don't have it as a group [in person], but this is part of it.
> —Gerry Duquette, *Ogimaa (Chief), Dokis First Nation*

The surveys clearly demonstrated that Band members use digital tools and platforms regularly for a variety of purposes. 82% of the Dokis youth respondents reported that they use online platforms, including using Facebook, YouTube, and various other workshop platforms, to both learn about art and share their own art. 57% of the adults surveyed indicated that they learn about art and artists through online platforms. We also learned that adults engage with their children through digital media: 57% use YouTube and other platforms to watch videos with their children; 14% create videos with their children; and 28% listen to podcasts or read digital books with their children. This latter number was consistent with pre-COVID habits, which indicates a prevalence

and importance of digital media over a longer period. This digital history and tendency could offer ways of addressing the learning needs that respondents outlined in the surveys. For example, 44.4% communicated that they need instruction, teachings, and mentorship to be able to create work and establish practices not only with respect to using their current media, but also the media that they want to use in the future. This includes wanting to learn video and short film, podcasting, and virtual reality.

The familiarity with digital platforms and wide interest with how various platforms can be used for learning, joining with others, or adapted for specific purposes is important for continuities in knowledges, learning, and relations over the long term, especially for youth:

> I also know that we're talking about going on our land and recording, and someone I know said, "It'd be great to have some of our linguistics teachers say the areas in our Anishinaabemowin, why we call it this, or what does it mean." Because sometimes we think that's what they mean, but it's not really what it is. A lot of our words are stories within themselves. And it's part of that, that knowledge that could be, you know, that spoken word, but there's a spirit that our words. That is something that could be done because we are losing, unfortunately, a lot of our language speakers and those Knowledge Keepers. So that could be a whole other area to enhance our knowledge and I know our youth are learning Anishinaabemowin in our school, and they could help too, so they know why that word is that way. So, they can understand that relationship, or what we have, or that spirit of that word. I think it could be a good way of rekindling some people's knowledge of our language. —Gerry Duquette

In addition to a range of online cultural workshops, teachings, and other digital community animations, the option of podcasting grabbed the imaginations of participants in the youth circle, and the adult survey also indicated a high level of interest. Podcasting is seen as a valuable platform for creating content, sharing cultural experiences, and joining together. The podcast format, which typically develops as a series, could help build both a presence and a following. It could become a vibrant space for both big and small stories. In fact, 43% of the adult respondents said they'd like to learn about podcasting from a professional podcaster or radio producer.

> I have not started any podcasts yet but have always wanted to. I now see many of the Indigenous influencers starting them. —Survey respondent

> That's what I loved about radio too, is that the people I was interviewing were just as fun as the people I was working with. And that's what I loved about those interviews and talking is that like, you learn something new every day. That's why I love journalism. That's why I love teaching now. I'm always learning something new from experts or Elders or, you know, the best people in that field. And I love that. —Erin Kennay
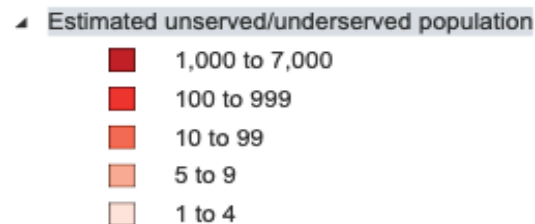
Makenzie and the youth circle, encouraged by the interest in podcasting that emerged through the circles and surveys, have been thinking more deeply about what a podcast might look like and how it could benefit Dokis community members who live on- and off-reserve. The flexibility of podcasts and pre-recorded digital media could allow the community to collect, share, and teach history and culture when it's impossible to do so in-person. This accessibility is particularly important for off-reserve and on-reserve Band members who can't attend in-person events and teachings even without the limitations imposed by the pandemic.

However, bandwidth is a major infrastructure hurdle for podcast content creators and listeners, and this isn't restricted to far north communities. Dokis, which is two hours north of Parry Sound (which is the technical border of Northern Ontario) and 1.5 hours southeast of Sudbury, has terrible internet.
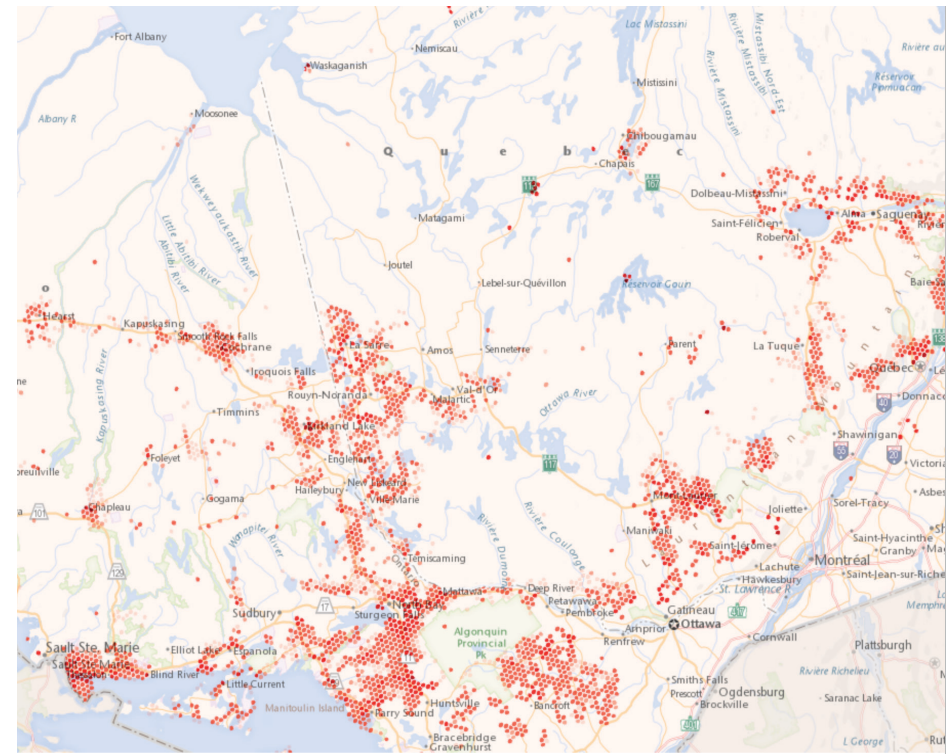
Government of Canada. Broadband Internet Coverage. 1:25,600,013. CartoVista. https://crtc.gc.ca/cartovista/internetcanada-en. (May 1, 2022).

[Broadband] Unserved/Underserved Population

Estimated unserved/underserved population

- 1,000 to 7,000
- 100 to 999
- 10 to 99
- 5 to 9
- 1 to 4

We have aerial photography that was digitized. And each file is 700 megabytes. So it's a document that I can't even include in an email. It's challenging in that sense that we're limited by the internet service that we have available. And even beyond that, there are certain areas in the community that receive no coverage at all. —Randy Restoule

The circle also considered a community radio station as an alternative to podcasts, given that the community has low bandwidth and that could cause problems when streaming or developing podcasts. A radio station would enable Dokis to avoid bandwidth issues; the content could be streamed and accessed when broadband allowed. The benefit of non-digital community radio is that it can only be accessed by those within the frequency area, which means the content is primarily created for, and tuned in to, by the community. This would foster the Dokis community's ability to both share and protect stories and cultural content. The downsides, however, included the challenge of reaching off-reserve Band members if radio was used, and the considerable infrastructure investment and development that is necessary to establish a radio station. Radio is less intensive than television broadcasting with respect to equipment and technology requirements, but significant expenses would include radio towers, recording equipment, and the personnel costs of a radio station itself. The Northern Aboriginal Broadcasting Program is the only available funding program for Indigenous radio infrastructure and, unfortunately, it only funds First Nations communities situated north of the 55th parallel. Its mandate is to support communities outside of the broadband core, even though many communities south of the 55th have significant connectivity issues.

The circle considered the logistical and fundraising challenges involved in establishing a community radio station against the community's high interest in podcasting (off-reserve Band members were particularly interested). They decided to focus on podcasting as a compelling and relevant platform for the community; they later decided that a pilot podcast series would be an effective way to test whether a wider group of Dokis community members from on- and off-reserve could gather. Simultaneously, they could also see if a podcast series would build engagement in topics of interest to the community.

Have a strong leader who knows what they're doing and can show them kind of step by step, and also, you know, kind of build that excitement of what it could be and bring those people together. For sure. Even if there's lots of moving pieces. There is a lot, but I find that the biggest hurdle is just setting it up. Because once you're set up, you know, it's easy to tweak and make little changes, or as I talked about, teach other people about different things. So that's the hardest part. —Erin Kennay

We can even have beading in podcasts or radio. [Start with] three people from three different…a lot of people are into art, so they can get out there and say, "Hey, this is what podcasting is. Hey, you know, if you don't like seeing your face on podcasts, we could do *this*." But I think it would be good to have three different people talk about three different things, [so] adults and Elders see it and are like, "Hey, this is interesting. I like this. I want to hear more." Mm hmm. I think that'd be a good idea.

Especially around powwow time. They haven't had the powwow for two years. And it's like, I've been really craving that Indian taco, and it's close. Anyway, so I said, I'm saying the amount of

people that come down for powwow, they're lined up down the road, both sides of the road, in the parking lot. And if they had this podcasting or they had a radio station, they'd be able to hear it when they're there, they'd be able to learn something new that they haven't learned. —Makenzie Dokis

While podcasting still carries with it the challenges of connectivity, the youth circle tried to find creative ways to circumvent the bandwidth issues, including creating pre-recorded or live recorded sessions that could be delivered in hybrid formats: they considered creating podcasts offline and then uploading in an area or community with good bandwidth; downloading content onto memory sticks and sharing it through the museum or library; and encouraging people to download content when they have access to internet, and then listening to it later.

That's what we were talking about too, if we were to ever do the radio or the podcasting, if someone doesn't have internet, they would save that on drive then if someone's going out to Sturgeon or someplace where we can upload it, then here you go. Here's the drive. Because it would take weeks for it to upload. It's difficult trying to work around that because there's so many great things that we could be doing. And it's difficult because you try to get there and you're like, I don't know, let's just try to figure out different things so we can help. —Makenzie Dokis

From a digital standpoint, most podcasts are things that have already been recorded. So, I think maybe having a website or somewhere quick that they can access to download those [recordings] while they are in a Wi-Fi zone. That's what I like about Apple podcasts is that if I know I'm going to be going for a long drive or a workout, I'll download all my podcasts. And then I can go wherever and I have access to that. So that

certainly helps a lot. Those are kind of my quick, two thoughts about audience, and the access. —Erin Kennay

The circle also discussed a Facebook pilot, as Facebook is the online platform that the most respondents use. Facebook would allow them to promote the podcast and also share preliminary podcasts to test community interest. Other discussions included podcast membership and how to create a closed group with agreement settings for Facebook page members. Aligned with agreement settings were concerns regarding how to ensure that privacy and consent measures are in place; it was important to ensure that posted material has information about consent, such as clear directions about how the post should be shared, and range, such as individuals who it could have access.

A podcast pilot addresses a number of interests and needs within the community, including the provision of meaningful local content that is "findable" by Band members. One respondent noted that listening to podcasts isn't specific; listening to a podcast involves choosing "random ones when I come across them" (anonymous survey respondent). There are other factors that could make podcasts less accessible. These include challenges of finding an online space for one's own content or finding podcasts to listen to within the vast scope of the internet. In addition, sharing stories, traditional teachings, and other culturally sensitive and contextual materials requires attunement with cultural protocols; if the cultural protocols and contexts are not understood by mainstream media, there is a risk for both the podcaster and the stories. The youth circle were also concerned about ways to protect local stories while enabling access to them. One method would be to use digital technology and, to avoid connectivity issues and protect stories and information meaningful to the community, avoid the internet completely.

That'd be interesting too where we can even have pre-loaded teachings on those tablets and or on those USB sticks. Oh, yeah,

you load everything on there. So there's no internet, nothing, it's all pre-recorded. And we can have those for people who want to try them out and be like you can have it until Friday, until you're done with it, and then you can bring it back. And then we can give it to someone else. —Makenzie Dokis

I think it's essential if something like this could be online, I could see that maybe it's a session online about beadwork, or how you're doing painting. I know that we had some activities at the hall, whether it was hand feathers or with the drums. And it'd be great if we can have some type of Zoom meetings. But I see the ethics of it and sometimes there's a spirit to items that we make, and not to interfere with that or to, I guess, do it in a good way. Sometimes we have some members that have difficulties to have access to online, and they have difficulties saying, well, you're not supposed to be doing these types of things, and it's recorded. —Gerry Duquette

Overall, however, there are many potential benefits to podcasts, if they are approached care-fully. As one respondent said, "Media, when used properly and respectfully, can give a platform for culture to be shared and knowledge and appreciation to be gained by those who might not normally be able to." (For more on approaching dissemination with care, see here. For an overview of Visibility in the region, see here.)

The topic of digital engagement, generally, evoked a number of other ideas among members of the youth circle. One member spoke about the challenge of finding places to both learn about art and to share work in the community. Even without the pandemic closures, there are few places to show work and no professional galleries in the community. For emerging artists in particular, professionalization is intimidating. This may explain why the majority of respondents said that of all avenues of sharing their work (from galleries to social

media), they share primarily with family and friends. This underscores the point that it's important for the artist to have a safe place to share work: the artist's confidence in the work, its curation (including venue), presentation, and any discussion of the work within the art community and the community in general is aligned with safety. The circle discussed how the podcast could involve a range of community members and artists in addition to those involved in singing or beading circles: it could share pre-recorded podcasts and archival recordings; it could link to artists' websites or share art images directly on the Facebook page to help build presence and share work.

The Dokis Band regularly addresses a number of complex issues relating to collections. It manages and curates collections that are housed on-reserve and managed by the community, but it also makes significant effort to regain control over the stories, recordings, documents, sacred items, and remains that were taken, stolen, appropriated, or otherwise removed from the community. Some cultural materials, such as recordings, may have originally been given with consent, but the Band has found it difficult to access original recordings or to control future dissemination. This difficulty raises many questions and concerns about the control of intellectual and cultural materials over time and how to establish clarity about the meaning of permission or consent to record. The advent of digital reproduction and dissemination increases the complexity of the Band's attempts to return cultural and other material to the community and safeguard its present and future use in culturally appropriate and respectful ways. While some materials continue to exist in digital formats, for instance the final version of the *Eagles on the River* film based on Dokis, the original interviews are no longer accessible to the community.

Where are these written tapes and stuff like that? So being able to access past research, past documents, even some of the more recent research projects that we have at Nipissing University to get access to that original information is somewhat of a

challenge. So, again, that's speaking from an administrative standpoint, for the First Nation. There are some concerns and challenges with that, as well for just a point on additional future partnerships or assistance. —Randy Restoule

Digital story sharing also relates to questions about informal documentation by Band members—family photos and stories—that are shared online. The circle discussed how it might be meaningful to develop a digital family archive at the Dokis Museum, so that important (including daily, seasonal, and "small") stories are recorded. It was noted how, over time, the family collections of personal photos lose the stories associated with them, along with the names, dates, and places. The Band could provide a space, through the museum, for the stories and the family collections related to them.

On October 26, 2021, a signing ceremony with representatives of the community, including Dokis Chief Gerry Duquette and the Museum's President Julian Siggers, transferred ancestral remains found on Dead Island back to the Dokis First Nation; this was a multi-year process to return ancestral remains to the community from where they had been housed at the Field Museum in Chicago. From the Dokis First Nation Museum website:

> Over the last several years, Dokis First Nation has been leading the "Dead Island Repatriation Project" on behalf and with the consent of First Nation communities within the Robinson Huron Treaty. Dokis representatives and Field Museum staff conducted collaborative research to determine how these six ancestral remains came to be in the Museum's care: they found that anthropologist Thomas Proctor Hall (1858–1942) removed these individuals from their graves in 1891. At the time, Hall took these remains on behalf of anthropologist Franz Boas (1839–1915) for anthropological exhibits at the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. Some of these exhibits, including the remains of these six individuals, became

part of the Museum's collections after the conclusion of the Exposition.[2]

This restitutional process is seen as a way for the community to both repatriate ancestral remains and engage the community in the process. Digital methods enable a way to achieve that engagement:

> That could be something that could be documented on how respectfully we're bringing these remains, returning them to their rightful place. I know there's part of the ceremony we won't be able to record or disclose. But I think the accomplishments of what was started and to finally bring them back home, that could be something that can be shared to our members. —Gerry Duquette

> I did speak to Holly about this for some time at the North Bay Mobile Media Lab. We definitely want to be able to record the process, the repatriation of those remains, to whatever is acceptable from a culturally sensitive aspect. —Randy Restoule

The use of archival materials, teachings, interviews and other documents is a complex issue that requires thoughtful consideration regarding protocols. It also requires strategies regarding how to ensure that the community continues to have access to the collections while also responding to the community's desire for more knowledge transfer. The Band is currently developing an ethics protocol for conducting and storing interviews, as well as the use of cultural materials, particularly in the context of dissemination and storage of digital media.

> A lot of our youth have a lot of great talent. [Digital media can help] to draw them out or, or to make sure to say, "Hey, you know, here's a venue for you, here's a platform that you can enjoy." And having our more elderly, whether it's songs or

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2   See https://www.fieldmuseum.org/about/press/dokis-ancestral-remains-repatriated-dokis-first-nation.

paintings or stories, to not be afraid to sit down and share it. So I think it could work. I think people, our people like to tell stories. And we have that, and it's [about] how to share. I think this brings in the ethics of how to share it in a great way, so it's done from the heart, or it's done in a good way that stays here, but it's there to share. —Gerry Duquette

The importance of Dokis's history and the role that we as administration and staff and Chief and Council and would even go as far to say the role of the Museum is, is the importance to be able to share our history with the members across Canada, and we have members as far as the US as well. So the importance and the role of administration is to be able to share that information. I know there's a larger, much larger discussion on ethics and ownership and copyright and everything like that. —Randy Restoule

The community museum has a significant archive of interviews with local Elders, and artifacts and material culture that are currently only accessible by on-reserve Band Members (during the pandemic, they were inaccessible). Circle participants expressed a desire to see these interviews and cultural artifacts animated through stories. This would foster a more holistic understanding of the artifacts as active elements of a living culture, rather than as static objects—as Gerry Duquette and the other participants shared, the "Spirit is in the word." The stories could then be accessed at the museum and also online through virtual tours. The online availability would broaden access to the museum.

It's very important that we have this museum, and it is important that we do record that history and preserve it in a way to be able to share those stories for future generations. —Randy Restoule

One of the items that I had in my possession for my grandfather Albert was a hand carved muskie lure. Now, just imagine how many stories would be related to that? Right? It could be eight hours of discussion, just talking fishing stories. Of course, it would be recorded if he was able to tell those stories today. And so that way the story could not get any larger [laughing]. So yeah, even another item, the crosscut saw, right, there's a couple of crosscut saws that I had in my possession from my grandfather that were donated to the museum. And I believe there was a toolbox as well that was marked John C, which is my great-grandfather. So all of these stories on, you know, where did that toolbox. What cottages? How far has it travelled in stories related to construction on the river and everything like that? Maybe the home? Maybe that toolbox was used to build this home and stuff like that? I'm sure it was. But you know, there's so many stories in one item, it's just the possibilities are infinite, I would say. —Randy Restoule

Not just having someone to walk with you in the museum and tell you the stories but to even hear the person tell you the stories. Where it's not just, "Oh, this is a pipe. This person smoked his pipe." It really doesn't make sense like that. You would have something where, "Oh, this person, he liked doing this because he'd be on the water, logging…" Where you can actually feel the story. Not just pointing at things and saying, "Oh yeah, it's that there." It's nice to actually have something to back up that story. To actually have native stories to go along with certain items that are in the museum. I think that would be a great way to learn, especially songs or even different things like that. I think that'd be good as well. —Makenzie Dokis

The various strategies discussed in the circles regarding community stories and how to gather and share with each other—whether through digital or hybrid methods—reflects a larger process of narrative sovereignty that seeks to enact the "spirit of the word" while following ethical and culturally relevant protocols. The Dokis Band and its

members are meaningfully discovering and adapting digital tools for their own purposes. They are creating and repatriating their own content, telling their own stories, and speaking to their own members in their own ways. While all the circles and survey participants were enthusiastic about the capacity of digital devices and platforms to link community members, both within and beyond the context of the pandemic, they were mindful of ethical considerations and protocols in sharing, disseminating, archiving, and experiencing events. Approaching the digital realistically—such as the inability of digital forms to exactly replicate or replace the on-the-ground experience—also factored into the conversations. In response to the survey question about sharing their work, respondents said that they wanted to share their work both online and in the community. This indicates an overall recognition that both online and on-site methods are possible to foster connections in a variety of contexts and at differing scales.

> So just to be more open to learn digitally rather than in person nowadays…right now everyone's on their computers and tablets and all that. So even when drumming and even singing, it's different because when you're in front of a public, you know you have that pressure on you, but it's a different feeling compared to seeing digitally because you're just singing and you feel comfortable. It's also you're singing for your community. You have them there. It's a different, different kind of feeling than singing over the internet. —Gerry Duquette

> But in a big circle, everyone has all their things that they need to bead, everything like that, but they're still there. They're still socializing, but they're also keeping it safer. Because, you know, if they're wearing a mask and everything like that we could give them beading care packages, or whatever, and still give them interaction, especially for the Elders that don't really know how to use the internet. I thought that would be a great idea. Or people who just don't have the internet at all, don't know how

to use it. That's just a thought. Instead of going digital all the time, because some people, they don't like to Zoom. Sometimes it's a little difficult for them. I've been seeing [this] in the Dokis group, a lot of them hate it, even though it's not that difficult, but for them, it is. —Makenzie Dokis

> It's just going to be sessions to get them interested. There's a large component that you cannot receive online. When you sit along around the drum and you feel a vibration, and you feel like your own heart beating as the drum is going and there's a sensation and you're there. No, you won't be able to get that [online]. But if you have that interest, or it sparks that curiosity, and in future you were able to meet and, and sit around that drum again, you know, I think that that might bring people back. —Gerry Duquette

The conversations acknowledged that all the needs of the community and its members could not be met by one single application or one single approach. Some things can and should only be in person; other engagements could benefit from hybrid digital/offline strategies that either draw people into the in-person cultural activities, or enhance them; and other engagements, such as preserving archival documents, conducting Elder interviews, or enlivening the experiences of material culture, would best be launched in solely digital ways.

Considerations about digital transitions, particularly for Indigenous youth, are important given broader trends and contexts relating to the use of digital platforms, internet access, and anticipated needs for technological knowledge and application. The RBC Report "Building Bandwidth: Preparing Indigenous Youth for a Digital Future" notes that "Indigenous youth are the fastest-growing cohort of Canadian youth, with their numbers expanding four times quicker than the non-Indigenous population. They will represent 45% of the Indigenous population by 2030," yet "Only 24% of households in

Indigenous communities have access to quality, high-speed Internet." The report notes that "the digital divide is real. The survey revealed a 13-percentage-point gulf in confidence between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth when it comes to digital literacy. The gap was widest among those still in school and narrowed as young people gained work experience." Citing youth that are sharing videos and other content on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, the report advises that "Indigenous youth are going to play a key role in bridging their communities to the digital age. Imagine how much more they could do if given the right tools."[3]

What these conversations suggest:

Capacity: There is a need for community radio and podcasting development and infrastructure, not only for communities north of the 55th parallel, but for those that have limited broadband. Reliable broadband is a critical need for many communities, even within the southern borders of Northern Ontario.

Being Care-full: Being respectful when sharing stories (sharing is a gift) is central to how, when, and where stories are disseminated. Control of the dissemination needs to be in the hands of Indigenous communities and the storytellers themselves. Digital strategies and digital storytelling have many nuances for communities to consider.

Hybrid approaches: Digital strategies, particularly podcasting and the sharing of cultural content through recordings, virtual tours, and online workshops are particularly relevant to Dokis Band members, but they are also very adamant that digital strategies cannot replicate, or completely replace, in-person engagements. The digital can enhance or provide access to in-person engagements in a different way. Critically, there are cultural and spiritual aspects that cannot and should not be shared in digital spaces, particularly given the ease of digital dissemination.

Strategies: Funding programs are needed to support the piloting of podcasting and community radio stations, including training and mentorship, equipment purchases, coordination, and infrastructure. While the Local Journalism Initiative is available to communities, the funding doesn't have the flexibility to support collective efforts and part-time or pilot projects; it also doesn't fund the costs for a local community to host and develop a project.

For further resources and funding to support Indigenous broadcasting and podcasting, see the resources section here.

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3 See https://thoughtleadership.rbc.com/building-bandwidth-preparing-indigenous-youth-for-a-digital-future/.

ECOSYSTEMS OF SUPPORT:
ORGANIZATIONS,
ORGANIZING +
COLLABORATIONS

Peter Morin, *the artefacts from the performance* (2014). Mixed media. Installation view at 180 Projects (Sault Ste. Marie).

ECOSYSTEMS OF SUPPORT:
ORGANIZATIONS, ORGANIZING + COLLABORATIONS

I feel that people want more. I do. And I think that too often they circle and circle things around their own networks feeling like that's enough not knowing how to get beyond it. The question is how to get out of that closed circuit, and at least take a crack that glass ceiling. You need that extra lift: "A new person who can actually offer possibilities beyond my little bubble."
—Nadine Arpin, *Two-Spirit Michif filmmaker, Sioux Lookout*

We're currently classified as an ad hoc collective. We've been incubating, as they say, within a gallery with non-profit status. That has two implications. First, there's the fact that we don't have a board structure right now, which is limiting for us. But the second order to that limitation is the fact that a board structure and that particular form of professionalization is very off-putting for many of our community members. You know, to be even an eligible partner for larger opportunities, you need to turn yourself into a sort of corporate molecule—and that is exactly what so many of our community members and the art we create responds to. And so it's an ongoing conversation for us around how do we professionalize our organizational structure in a way that is aligned with the values and the day-to-day reality of our particular community? So that, you know, is a real bottleneck for us right now. Because the way that we answer that question is going to have implications for the funding opportunities we're eligible for. We're working to think through: are there non normative structures that are possible? Or are there ways for our community values to be baked into the structure of a board, that'll open doors for us in the future?
—Rémi Alie, *Art Fix of Nipissing*

In my own life, I'd rather not be online. I'm longing to connect with my own practice, but I'm not there yet. I want it to be small and sustainable. Why this constant idea that you're supposed to grow, when there's nothing to sustain that growth? Funders support programs, but not the staff, the backbone—artist-run programs have little or no funding for staff.
—ElizaBeth Hill, *singer-songwriter and multidisciplinary artist, Mohawk from the Six Nations of the Grand River Territory, Thunder Bay*

It's well documented that organizations spend as much time establishing, building, and maintaining their administrative and structural capacity as they do providing programming. Access to core (operating)[1] funding assists with their long-term stability because the long-term and flexible funds enable, particularly for those organizations that receive significant operating grants, dedicated staff positions, well-facilitated administrative functions, established internal structures, and secure and consistent funding. In turn, stable core funding means that organizations can devote focus and resources toward programming and arts development (or service) within the sector.

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1   These ongoing funds are referred to as operating grants at the Ontario Arts Council and core funding at the Canada Council for the Arts. Generally, these funds allow recipients to direct the funding to any operating expenses (such as staffing, capital or equipment purchases, or rent), whereas project funding allows a maximum administrative or operating expense within the budget.
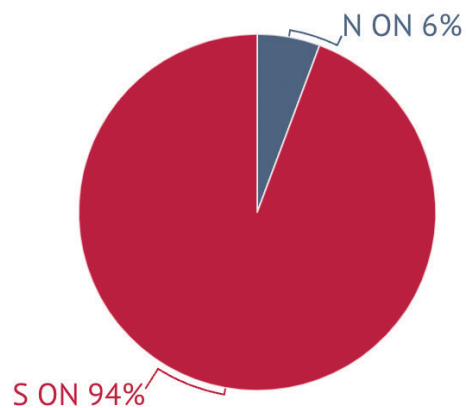
Region	Total Funding
N ON	18,535,272
S ON	307,826,154

17.1 OAC and CCA Total Organizational Funding (Fiscal Years 2017-2018 to 2019-2020)

17.1a Table of OAC and CCA Total Organizational Funding (Fiscal Years 2017-2018 to 2019-2020)

In Northern Ontario, there are two main public funding sources of operating or core funding: the Ontario Arts Council (OAC) and the Canada Council for the Arts (CCA). In 2021, only three media arts organizations in Northern Ontario received funding from both, and only a handful of organizations received funding from the OAC.

Media Arts organizations that received both OAC and CCA operating/core funding in 2020–21 include the Near North Media Lab and its Digital Creator program, which has labs in six communities (OAC: $17594; CCA: $85,000); Cinéfest/CION Sudbury (OAC: $58,515 and $43,596); New Adventures in Sound Art (OAC: $30,083; CCA: $42,000). Weengushk Film Institute was a new OAC grant recipient, (OAC: $50,000). For OAC funding, all eligible operating grant recipients were awarded the same amount in 2020–21 as in 2019–20[2].

Other organizations and artist–run centres that provide some media arts programs, such as the Visual Arts Artist Run Centres,[3] receive operating and core grants from other funding programs. For example, the only film festival in the region that receives OAC Media Arts operating funding is Cinéfest Sudbury ($58,515, Media Arts operating). Their companion organization, Cultural Industries Ontario North (CION), received $43,596 from the OAC Arts Service Organizations operating program; and Sudbury Indie Cinema received $40,000 from the OAC's Media Arts Operating program.

Charts 17.1 and 17.1a represents organizational funding over three fiscal years, from 2017 to 2020. Data from the OAC demonstrates that there is surface parity between Northern and Southern Ontario organizational grants based on population, as well as grant requests relative to grant success. However, the data shown in the chart (17.1) does not enable a deeper evaluation of the limiting effect that higher costs and limited infrastructure in Northern Ontario has on organizations (and the artists they support) that are creatively contributing and representing the arts in Northern Ontario and Canada. The region is characterized by communities and artists living and working in remote, rural and urban spaces—often separated by distance and with struggles relating to broadband connectivity, social and economic disparities, equipment and resource gaps, and fewer alternative sources of revenue. Considered within this context, the overall allocations to northern organizations and artists is less because costs, in the North, are much higher than for southern counterparts and accessible resources are not as abundant.

Two elements are clear: first, the region has very few organizations receiving operating funding, and only a handful of organizations dedicated to media arts; second, these realities suggest that there are

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2   https://www.arts.on.ca/grants/general-granting-information/grant-results/2020/march/media-arts-organizations-operating

3   Debajehmujig (Manitowaning, has a media arts studio/recording studio, $265,473), White Water Gallery (media arts exhibitions, including involvement in Ice Follies, North Bay, $16,846), Galerie du Nouvel-Ontario (Sudbury, $55,111), and Aanmitaagzi (Nipissing First Nation, Ice Follies collaboration, $33,672).

barriers for organizations in Northern Ontario to apply for these sources of stable funding, and resultant limits to the regional media arts infrastructure capacity.

Inequities in the distribution of funding and administrative expertise affect the breadth of operating organisations in Northern Ontario and causes a reliance-cascade on smaller running entities and their own access to resources, including funding allocated from other competitive pools. Currently, the operationally funded organizations are mainly found in North Bay, Sudbury, and Manitoulin Island, however, as a result of their small numbers and their clustered locations in the region, artists rely more heavily on functioning artist-run centres, art collectives, and arts councils. These are notably key to Northern Ontario's media arts sector, yet their long-term stability, too, is threatened by a variety of factors, including access to funding.

Project funding from the arts councils, which can only cover a small amount of administrative/operating expenses is depended upon by organizations, ad hoc collectives, and artist-run centres to curate media arts exhibitions, support media artists, and provide other media-based programming. Art Fix of Nipissing (North Bay) and 180 Projects (Sault Ste. Marie) are good examples of unincorporated groups that support the media arts community, but struggle with capacity and accessing the kinds of funds they need. (For more on their experiences, see pages here and here.)

In Northern Ontario, there is a significant gap in art service to the media arts sector for organizations and for individual artists. While organizations in the region are able to support some artist development through their curatorial and programming mandates, they typically do not have the funding capacity (or the mandate) to provide art service. Art service includes development of the sector, professional development and training, mentorship, community building, advocacy and support, and administrative and organizational consulting and

advice. Members of the Media Arts Network of Ontario (MANO) can receive some of this art service support, however, it is always a challenge for provincial organizations to adequately cover such a large region with its range of contexts and needs. The only formalized art service organization in Northern Ontario (in any discipline) is Cultural Industries Ontario North (CION) in Sudbury, whose role is to promote and advance the film sector regionally. Yet, media artists across the region, when this was discussed, were unfamiliar with CION and its role, or they perceived that CION's mandate was primarily focused on art service support in Sudbury.

CION's Cinéfest Sudbury programming does include workshops and panel presentations for commercial filmmakers and independents, but CION's professional development conference is only held every second year and may not be accessible (financially and/or geographically) for filmmakers across the region. Some organizations, such as the art collective Art Fix of Nipissing, provide some arts development services, such as selecting one or two artists from their membership each year to provide dedicated support to help launch them professionally, and strong media arts programming is part of their organizational approach, but their mandate is local to the North Bay area. Other organizations that provide art service include Mindful Makers, which offers professional and artistic development for area members, and the Near North Mobile Media Lab (n2m2l) provides training and equipment lending. In addition, n2m2l's Digital Creator program provides equipment and training to youth at six locations in the region. There are local arts councils in communities across the region, yet these councils continue to lack capacity (few receive operating or municipal funding) and are affected by burnout, problems with gatekeeping, and more diverse representation issues in both membership and artistic disciplines. Visual arts is typically the main focus of arts councils.

The OAC outreach capacity was significantly reduced after the 2019 cuts, which saw the closure of the Northeastern Ontario representative

position. The cuts also reduced some equity programs, including Deaf and Disability Arts Projects, which funds creation projects, production elements, and professional development. These cuts affected the support of deaf and/or disabled Ontario-based artists and art professionals, as well as ad hoc groups, collectives, and any art organizations who have mandates to serve artists or art professionals who are deaf and/or have a disability. The Northwestern Representative position is still active but is staffed by one person who is responsible for a very large area, and the CCA offers very rare outreach events in the region.

> I do know that the OAC used to have people that came up here to help artists with grant applications. I don't know if they do that anymore. In my years mentoring Indigenous youth I have observed that this kind of support is definitely needed.
> —Tracie Louttit, *film producer and director, Garden River First Nation*

Overall, outreach is poor. Artists are unaware of services and how to access them. There is a disproportion between artists who could benefit from consistent art services and the number of organizations that can provide those services regularly. There is a lack of comprehensive, consistently broad art service and there is no single media arts organization in the region with a strict mandate to support individual media artists in ways that include artistic development, career and professional development, mentorship and training.

Reflecting on the conversations and experiences shared throughout this research project, it is clear that when organizations have funding and capacity, communities and artists benefit from reciprocity, or a virtuous circle, comprised of organizational, geographic, community-based media arts creation, presentation, engagement, and collaborations. These are accompanied by vibrant conversations and engagement in contemporary media arts practices.

Such clusters are noticeable around North Bay, for instance, where there are several funded organizations with both project and core/operating funding, including the Near North Mobile Media Lab (n2m2l), New Adventures in Sound Art (NAISA), and White Water Gallery (WWG). Several other organizations are located in Sudbury. The proximity of organizations to each other has enabled cross-pollinations and collaborations, such as the Ice Follies Festival, and an ability to generate conversations and programs among each other and develop strategies for supporting artists. Elsewhere in the region however, such as in Sault Ste. Marie or northwest of the region, there is a noticeable gap in well-funded organizations across the media arts sector.

In fact, over several years, there has been a documented decrease in funding to the region. While all organizations across the province received an "across the board" eight percent decrease to their operating funding in response to the Ford government cuts to the OAC, the data demonstrates that the overall percentage decrease in funding (both media arts, and in all programs) has been higher in Northern Ontario.

Year	Sum of Recommended Amount N ON	Sum of Recommended Amount S ON	% Reduction in Funding Each Fiscal Year for Northern Ontario
2017–2018	$117,598	$1,210,092	-11%
2018–2019	$132,886	$1,248,371	-10%
2019–2020	$106,192	$1,162,955	-11%
Total	$356,676	$3,621,418	-11%

17.2: OAC Funding Comparison for Organizations, Northern Ontario and Southern Ontario (Fiscal Years 2017-2018 to 2019-2020)

To see funding change, year over year,

N ON 3%

S ON 97%
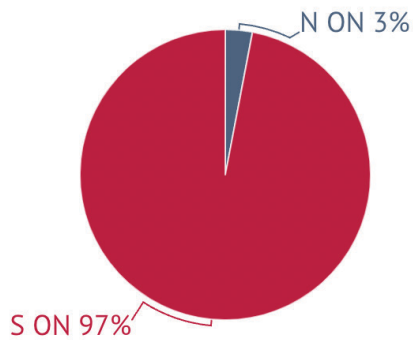
17.3 Total OAC Organizational Funding (Fiscal Years 2017-2018 to 2019-2020)

N ON 9%

S ON 91%
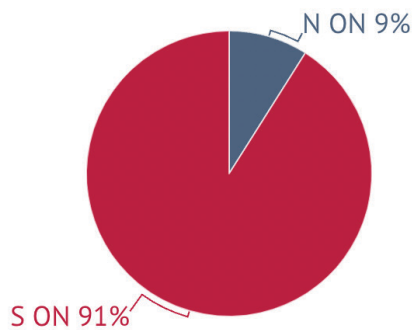
17.4 Total Accumulated OAC Media Arts Funding (Fiscal Years 2017-2018 to 2019-2020)

These conversations mirror findings outlined in Dr. Jude Ortiz's doctoral thesis (2017), which was based on culture-sector research conducted across Northern Ontario. Ortiz is Senior Research Coordinator at the Northern Ontario Research Development and Knowledge (NORDIK) Institute:

> Geographic proximity, critical mass, and critical connections underpin the sector's capacity to scale up into industry clusters. Long-standing non–profit cultural organizations, ad hoc [groups]

and collectives are the foundation of the sector. Partnerships and meaningful collaborations better utilize limited resources and generate greater impact in meeting local, regional, and global markets. The culture sector's vitality is dependent upon the social milieu—interdependent and interconnected webs of diverse relationships between and among artist producers, intermediaries (organizations, institutions, businesses, galleries, retail outlets, media) and consumers, spanning the non-profit, private and government sectors that underpin participation in the arts and transacting business. Critical connections and direct interaction lead to: education through peer mentoring; innovation; industry clusters; and, the emergence of a localized–culture based economy that links regionally and globally.[4]
—Dr. Jude Ortiz, *Senior Research Coordinator, Northern Ontario Research Development and Knowledge (NORDIK) Institute, Sault Ste. Marie*

Media arts infrastructure offers a framework that can support artists, however, there are intrinsic challenges when organizations are both heavily relied upon and resources to support artists are competitive and difficult to obtain. As a result, there are a range of challenges that relate to media arts infrastructure, local capacity, and the relationships between organizations, artists and local arts councils. The (anglophone) councils that have had long term success, for example, tend to focus on a single activity that falls within their volunteer capacity, typically an annual exhibition or art tour. However, many artists don't feel represented by their councils, either because the council is heavily focused on the visual arts to the exclusion of other arts media or because the leadership and membership is largely made up of white, mainly older, generations. Some interviewees noted that gatekeeping at the council level affects their relationships with artists and the local arts community in a negative way. Indigenous, queer, contemporary, and young artists tend to

4   Jude Ortiz, *Culture, creativity and the arts: Building resilience in Northern Ontario.* PhD thesis, University of the West of England, 2017.

not see themselves reflected in the councils, and this compels alternative ways of sharing their art beyond organizations and arts councils. Some interviewees noted the inability of many arts councils to provide the kind of support that artists and organizations need.

Some artists have noticed a generational shift in the ways emerging artists gain experience and connect with their communities. Paul Sebalj, a talented musician in his early 20s, and fellow musician Brian Jones, spoke with Sophie Edwards about the dynamic Timmins music scene that existed as Paul was growing up. Paul learned to play and perform by following his dad and granddad to gigs, watching them, and sometimes playing and learning alongside them. They were emphatic about the importance of these informal networks, in-person and on-the-ground experiences, and the role of intergenerational learning. They noted how the prevalence of online music, and the COVID pandemic, have changed the shape of these networks. Brian also noted the emergence of the new arts council in Timmins. He felt that councils need to be relevant to youth and diverse community members—in order to gain momentum, there is a need to "do something" tangible by arts councils and other arts networks.

Zach Cassidy, a filmmaker from Timmins, echoed Paul and Brian's observations. He has expanded his filmmaking opportunities beyond Timmins and Northern Ontario by connecting with European filmmakers. While digital connections are a good practice, he felt there is greater value when there are tangible activities and collaborations that build relationships and advance the artists' practices over time, both inside and outside of the community.

> All collaborations are so important, because it forces you to think about what kinds of stories need to be told for people in the north to bond and to relate over them together. Collaboration, whether it's inside Northern Ontario or outside, ends up serving Northern Ontario if something gets made—

that's the key. Something has to get made in the end.
—Zach Cassidy, *filmmaker, Timmins*

While Zach is speaking more directly about projects and collaborations, others have also pointed to the important role that the arts council could serve, but that its role as a catalyst for artists is hampered by a lack of intergenerational and diverse membership, an ability to embrace the role of digital outreach, and a lack of meaningful, concrete activities. The absence of community-based media arts communications (whether through an online or print community newsletter or calendar), combined with duplication of services or lack of access, affects audience and interest.

> An arts council is supposed to be this catalyzing artist-driven organization that's representative and supports artists. Nobody doubted the importance of the role of the arts council, but it was increasingly not able to [function with so few members and burnout]. It was struggling with a generational divide. You had some members who were really trying to recruit younger participants, and you had others who were playing more of that gatekeeping role. A lot of the gaps that were identified in the report and the cultural plan stemmed from things that the arts council used to do, but could no longer do, things like a community calendar. Now, of course, that landscape is totally different, because the internet has really changed things. And you had some people who lamented the loss of the calendar, which was the monthly magazine that contained the calendar of all the events, except it wasn't actually *all* the events; it was the events of the established organizations. —Anonymous

> Why is there not more access to equipment and training? Why do people hold the keys to these things? Part of the problem is there's a lot of duplications of services, limitation of services,

limitation to access. Sometimes, just a flat-out lack of existing services in the space. —Anonymous

Local councils look at existing models rather than charting anything new. —Dr. Jude Ortiz

Representation at the local level is important and has challenges; it requires a deep and sustained commitment to change making, equity, and social justice. Sean Meades, Chair of the Sault Ste. Marie Cultural Vitality Committee, spoke with Sophie Edwards about the role of arts councils, municipal arts investments and advisories, and the challenges of representational bodies:

> All arts councils have a huge challenge, because you have generational divides, you have the socio-cultural class divides that are endemic of all Canadian political contexts. You have disciplinary divides, right? So there's a lot to balance. And it's something that is extremely hard to do if you don't have not just a staff person, but a very experienced staff person. Add to that the whole regional aspect where, you know, I think it's around 20% of the population is Indigenous and around 20% of the population is Francophone. We can't use the same models of an arts organization based in Toronto.

> I'm really happy to see that across all the organizations that I know in Sault Ste. Marie, they're really interested in recruiting Indigenous participation. But you know, some of them are grappling with this, but a lot of them are missing that it's not just about creating space. It's not like Indigenous people are clamoring to get into your organization because what are you offering them, right? Indigenous Peoples and communities, first of all, are diverse. Second, you know, they also have their own arts and culture initiatives, and they don't really need your help. They're not waiting for you to create a quota so that

they can get on the board. And what's culturally relevant is different. Sometimes the difference is overstated, and that can be paternalism in another way. Like assuming that if something doesn't have a certain aesthetic character to it, then it's inherently not of interest to Indigenous peoples, which I think is also really paternalistic. Stereotypes, stereotyping, all these sorts of things. So, to create a regional organization, whether for the province or for Northern Ontario, is so hard, and I'm not sure how effective it would be, even if you could get that magic person who's bilingual and culturally ambidextrous and has connections to the diversity of artistic disciplines.

> I don't know what it is about arts and culture specifically, but I think especially with arts and culture, we should not be trying to speak with one voice. And I think that partly because I don't think it works. Maybe that was too definitive a statement, but I think that that was one of the endemic challenges of the arts council, any arts council, is that you create a sort of normative body. But artists, often by nature, whatever that is, you resist that. And that's part of the work of art is to challenge those norms.

> We might create a culture where people see—whether it's the municipality or other organizations—as not necessarily things that you have to be a part of, but at least bodies that can connect you to an opportunity, or to resources that you might need.

> But I think that there's general acknowledgement of the need for something like an arts council, or at least an arts advocacy organization of some kind that takes the political aspect of the city out of the equation, [regarding] certain things. To your point earlier, I think a decentralized network makes a lot more sense. And I think that it's important for organizations to continue to emphasize their differences, right? And that that sort of structure allows them to do that, to say, you know,

that's not a need, this is a need. You can contrast with other groups. And even to the point that I mentioned earlier about Indigenous participation; increasingly, primarily non-Indigenous organizations are realizing that like, oh, yeah, asking Indigenous people to participate is actually us asking them to do us a favour, to, you know, legitimize our settlerness through diversity.

Sure, there are opportunities for Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists to collaborate, and maybe there's, you know, cross-cultural organizations that would facilitate that role, but the idea that every single person is going to be able to be represented or participate, I don't think that can work. First of all, those collaborations really stemmed from your relationship building. And I think that the word relation, certainly in our discipline of community development, we use that word to mean a lot of different things. But that's really the key to a lot of these particular collaborations, whether it's mentorship, or whether it's cross-cultural dialogue.

There's actually a responsibility on the members' part to be going out into the community. And getting people's takes on things. Certainly, there's been an effort to collect information, to collect input, and to honour it. But it still hasn't got us to the point where I think community members feel like they really have ownership over the direction. And I think that [ownership] will get us to a point where we can actually create an arts council that will, you know, take on more of that role. I think the city can play a role, maybe, in co-hosting that or getting the process moving. —Sean Meades, *Chair, Cultural Vitality Committee, City of Sault Ste. Marie*

These challenges highlight the complex dynamics that organizations must address to provide services for a region as large as Northern Ontario. Resource sharing is often necessary to respond to gaps in

the sector and an efficient strategy is to also work with an existing organization that has infrastructure, staffing, and other resources. However, there are extremely nuanced community relationships that are also integral to building local versions of programs that are contextually and culturally relevant, and that have real local direction and ownership.

Near North Mobile Media Lab, for example, has facilitated a number of strong community relationships in the region and have consistently adapted to respond to community contexts and needs. This has allowed them to successfully deliver their outreach program for a number of years. It's not always the case that organizations have strong local relationships: sometimes outside organizations define the relationships or appoint themselves as regional representatives without real, local relationships. Across all forms of arts media organizations—arts collectives, artist-run centres, arts councils, and others—operational structures, methods, leadership, and capacity underpin the services that an organization can offer. Gatekeeping results in power dynamics and creates uneven and tense relationships, biases, distrust, and inaccessibility. Embedded relationships can sometimes shift when positions are rotated or have a time-limit. Integrating such changes allow for new (and sometimes lesser-known) voices to contribute and make changes.

Who is represented by local and regional organizations, the level of capacity to adequately resource an organization, and the willingness and time spent to develop and maintain relationships are all important factors to consider when designing a collaborative, or collective, resource sharing arrangement. (For more on collectivity and resource sharing, see here). Some challenges include having to structure programs around funding criteria, such as age specificity.
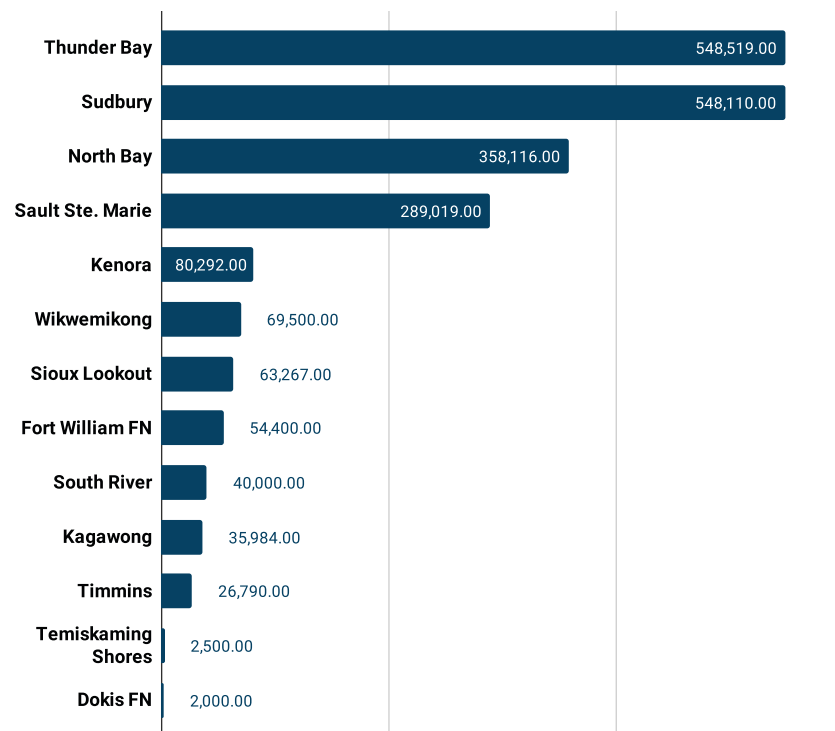
Many prior research projects about the regional arts sector have communicated that artists express a desire for some kind of unifying organization that could provide art service. Given the complexities of organizing councils at the local level, it is difficult to ascertain if any

single organization could meet the needs of the media arts sector (let alone the full spectrum of disciplines), and if so, what structure would work without flattening the complexities, experiences and contexts of the region? Who would represent the region? From time to time, local arts organizations—seeing the gaps—attempt to form some kind of a representational group, yet these organizations may not have the mandate (risking "mission creep") or the relationships to communities around the region that are strong and varied enough for equitable representation. Inevitably, when an organization claims it represents a demographic (rather than being asked to) or doesn't undergo a long and careful process to develop relationships, scope, and governance structures with diverse members of the community, it will eventually face insinuations or allegations of gatekeeping, inequities, and an overall failure to be representative.

The question remains: how to establish institutions of support for organizations and artists across the region? This research project was not mandated to investigate this question, nor was there enough time, resources, or representation to do so. It merits further, and care full consideration. (This use of the term "care full" is informed by the conversation with Garnet Angeconeb, see here.) There are very clear themes that emerged in these conversations that could inform ways to develop support across the region. Arts organizers, artists, and organizational representatives pointed to approaches for both local and regional arts service organizations: flexibility and responsiveness; a networked approach; regular changes in leadership and location of the leadership; and direction and control from within communities and the region. Included in these approaches was the possibility of developing wholly new models (or adaptation of older models such as cooperatives or unions) rather than girdling communities with existing models. A reconsideration of how existing service organizations deliver programs or assessing the mission of the organization might also show areas that could use resources or adaptation.

I really think ad hoc groups are the way to go because you and they can come and go. Groups organize, form and reform as needed, attracting "new blood" or focusing on a specific issue. Sometimes the ad hoc has a high turnover, other times it is short lived, running its course. Often there's more flexibility in leadership, unless you have one person that wrestles power dynamics. —Dr. Jude Ortiz

Our conversations with interviewees and an analysis of data from the CCA and the OAC, offers supported evidence that media arts clusters develop where there are media artists and organizations of support. For instance, in North Bay, the impact of the Near North Mobile Media Lab (n2m2l) is significant (see the case study on Lieann Koivukoski here); in another instance, 180 Projects, an artist-run centre in Sault Ste. Marie, has been influential to local and regional artists (see case study here), but is limited in its reach. In Sioux Lookout, as a more northern, and more rural, example, the circulating mentorship and support systems between artists has resulted in an emergent collective, the growth of practicing media artists, and the development of media arts production (for more about the work of this collective, see here). This expansion is connected to both the presence of individual artists, like Nadine Arpin, and the impact of the Digital Creator lab, run by the Near North Mobile Media Lab (n2m2l) at the local library. Smaller, rural communities demonstrate a similar trend: wherever there are practicing artists who influence, and support other artists, it enables and influences further development and resources—even when organizations are not present.

City	Amount
Thunder Bay	548,519.00
Sudbury	548,110.00
North Bay	358,116.00
Sault Ste. Marie	289,019.00
Kenora	80,292.00
Wikwemikong	69,500.00
Sioux Lookout	63,267.00
Fort William FN	54,400.00
South River	40,000.00
Kagawong	35,984.00
Timmins	26,790.00
Temiskaming Shores	2,500.00
Dokis FN	2,000.00

17.5 CCA/OAC Individual Grant Amounts by Select Cities in Northern ON (Fiscal Years 2017-2018 to 2019-2020)

Nadine Arpin, one of this project's conversation facilitators, spoke about the experience of Jordan Fiddler, a young media artist from Sandy Lake First Nation. Jordan's initial exploration into media had an additional boost when they were invited to participate in the 2019 Cold Waters Symposium and Emerging Artist Studio in North Bay (co-organized by MANO and Near North Mobile Media Lab).

> Jordan did spend a good portion of last year back in the community. Even though there was grant money and, I believe they did receive a small chunk of change to produce a short film, they struggled in the context of community support; trying to pull it off completely on their own, no crew or potential, so the project was stalled. I'm not too sure what happened with the

project. The good news is, since then Jet has been enrolled in a performance, media arts, and drama-oriented program of some sort in North Bay. They now, in theory, have access to a larger community. However, they still felt quite isolated. In a recent conversation, they expressed how, despite having been in North Bay for a while, they still hadn't met other artists. Since Jordan had participated in a n2m2l symposium the year prior, I thought they would have reached out to Jordan. So that was a little bit of a surprise for me. Where is the continuity of the network? How to ensure this piece is not lost. —Nadine Arpin

Although Digital Creator and the Near North Mobile Media Lab (n2m2l) have helped support the development of media arts clusters in communities across the region and helped emerging and young artists to explore media arts, there are gaps between these initial explorations and what it takes to develop a professional artistic practice with a portfolio of work. Some of these gaps have to do with infrastructure and the existence and capacity of existing institutions of support.

> It's more than just equipment. It's also a question of, where are you going to exhibit? Who's supporting these artists? Once you produce this work, where do we show it? Southern Ontario? There's some support in Thunder Bay, but other than the Thunder Bay Art Gallery, Definitely Superior, and the one film festival, there aren't places to show work here. —Nadine Arpin

An artist in the northwest made the point that there was a need for an informal online platform that would connect photographers and other artists together and offer aggregations of events, or news, focused on the arts scene. She felt that the current networks weren't inclusive enough, in terms of sharing across disciplines and across communities, particularly given the variety of ways to connect virtually. In response to the circle facilitator's question about the kinds of connections and support she'd want—artistic or social—the artist responded that

she and other people she knows would appreciate having access to equipment that they can test prior to making an investment, along with opportunities to connect with artists and community for collaborations, photo shoots, and other activities. These kinds of support and access would help artists extend the connections beyond their current circuits.

The same artist shared that it's difficult to get an outside eye on projects, particularly when working from a rural community, because there might not be other artists or curators in your discipline, or organizations of support. Given the lack of on-the-ground supports, she'd like to be able to share work-in-progress—on a Discord channel, or via other platforms—with others online for critiques, comments, and other feedback.

Nadine Arpin spoke about the important role collaborations and exchanges play in the development of a media arts ecosystem, and how these circulations build experience, and profile for artists, particularly in rural communities, where there may be fewer opportunities. She noted that she, and others in the circle were working hard to build their practices, but the support of other artists and organizations is needed to help artists move beyond "dreaming" to concrete actions. These inter-artist connections are particularly relevant in communities where no functional art organizations exist:

> I can support other artists. I can take some of that art money [such as grants] that I'm being given and redistribute it to other artists. That's a wonderful thing to do. It's nice when we can do that locally. I did a shoot recently with Melody McKivor. It was nice that she was reaching out to the people close by and she was accessing local talent. When I do artwork, I tend to access any artists I can, here, and sometimes I bring other people in too, because it's just nice to have that skill exchange, and see the kind of stuff that's going on in Southern Ontario that doesn't happen here as well.

In different conversations with Andrea Pinheiro and Rémi Alie, a range of models and ideas regarding organizational and administrative structures were discussed, including possibly expanding capacity by sharing administrative staff, in the way that some smaller galleries and independent curators are collaborating to present inter-community and multi-space (virtual and physical) exhibitions as a means to build capacity. Andrea considered the effect of reaching wider (and multi-local) audiences, ways to build conversations about contemporary practices, and the importance of circumventing restricted curatorial and space capacity and constraints. (For more on an example of these kinds of collaborations, see 180 Projects here.)

> What I'm hearing you describe in a sense is almost unionizing. It's sort of offloading the administrative responsibilities to a central hub, freeing up everyone else's time and capacity to actually do the work on the ground. Yeah, I think the idea of a sort of distributed network of ad hoc collectives that are centrally…no, I don't want to say centrally administered, that's not quite what we're talking about…but that are resource sharing, in a particular way to create a more impactful sum of the parts, I think, is a really neat idea. I think the idea of centralizing and pooling resources in order to free up organizational capacity elsewhere is really interesting. The notion of sort of hanging on to that flexibility and autonomy, while having the advantages of a larger institutional structure, sort of that key that unlocks so many doors. But even, you know, I imagine that sort of networking around peer-to-peer training and resource sharing is a sort of easier lift than creating a whole new model for arts administration. —Rémi Alie

Some ad hoc organizations, such as Art Fix of Nipissing and Mindful Makers in Thunder Bay, have found increased capacity by partnering with a senior organization. In this case, both were part of a three-year Ontario Trillium Foundation scaling project with Workman Arts

(Toronto). Now that the scaling project has finished, the organizations are struggling to continue the same level of programming and maintain capacity; this struggle has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Stacy Hare Hodgins interviewed artists and art organizers in Thunder Bay. She observed:

> The continuing pandemic (with things in Thunder Bay quickly moving in the wrong direction) coincides with the end of Workman Arts' Scaling Project, of which Thunder Bay/Mindful Makers Collective is one of three project sites. The end of this three-year project means an end to the funding (coordinator's salary, budget for artist fees/materials, studio space rentals/ access, etc.) previously provided by OTF via Workman Arts. The coordinator has carried all the moving parts of the collective to meet the scaling project criteria for three years now. Like many arts administrators with limited capacity and scant resources, she is overworked and exhausted, yet still focused on trying to create some sort of sustainability or ongoing connection for members of Mindful Makers Collective, in an effort to keep it from completely collapsing at the end of the scaling project. One option was to form a non-profit, but it seems that moving forward as a collective seeking project-based funding is the way to go for now. There is an active group of core members keen to enrich their practices and exchange knowledge/skills with other artists. So, from my view, I'd say that a platform doesn't yet exist, but with the coordinator's lead, we are definitely exploring possibilities to continue to work together.
> —Stacey Hare Hodgins, *Thunder Bay*

Art Fix has a bit more stability given it has an administrative "nest" at White Water Gallery. For grant applications, when an incorporated entity is an eligibility requirement, the gallery is able to act as their formal applicant; they've also provided other administrative supports that have enabled Art Fix to focus on programming rather than administrative and organizational development functions.

> We're currently classified as an ad hoc collective. We've been incubating as they say, within a gallery with non-profit status. That has two implications. First, there's the fact that we don't have a board structure right now, which is limiting for us. But the second order to that limitation is the fact that a board structure and that particular form of professionalization is very off-putting for many of our community members. You know, to be even an eligible partner for larger opportunities, you need to turn yourself into a sort of corporate molecule, that is exactly what so many of our community members and the art we create, responds to. And so it's an ongoing conversation for us around how do we professionalize our organizational structure in a way that is aligned with the values and the day-to-day reality of our particular community? So that is a real bottleneck for us right now. Because the way that we answer that question is going to have implications for the funding opportunities we're eligible for. We're working to sort of think through, are there non normative structures that are possible? Or are there ways for our community values to be baked into the structure of a board, that'll open doors for us in the future? —Rémi Alie

The Sioux Lookout circles echoed these kinds of critiques of dominant structures and approaches. They astutely observed that a single model doesn't work for each community and each context, for each individual (Indigenous communities, women, artist-parents, disabled artists, queer artists, remote communities) or over time.

> The formula is broken. I think it doesn't work. Maybe it's something that needs to be evolved for each location. Everybody has their own things and their own ways, and ways that are appropriate. And maybe we need to be more open

to that idea of a more nuanced approach that's specific to communities or specific to regions. —Nadine Arpin

These structural questions are critical. They determine governance structures and influence an organization's eligibility for funding. Members of ad hoc collectives cite the importance of flexibility and responsiveness that is cultivated in the ad hoc collective structure. For example, they are able to address their members' contexts and needs and the needs and contexts of the community; they can dedicate their efforts to programming, rather than administration; there is a flattened governance and engagement structure that invites more direction from members, along with peer-to-peer support and mentoring; and perhaps most importantly, as Rémi noted, they don't have to adopt a structure that is anathema to their principles, to their approaches, and to the ways of working of their members.

These elements of the ad hoc collective partially reflect the desired structural form of the collective itself, informed by its membership and leadership bodies, but also reflect the evolved adaptation to the severe state of underfunding for ad hoc and informal groups, and, therefore, diminished capacities that they, as a collective, routinely address. Unfortunately, as unincorporated entities, they are not able to apply for operating or core funding grants which would support administrative functions and staffing. Despite the fact that many ad hoc groups and collectives have a strong and consistent record of programming excellence, these groups are considered to be emerging organizations, rather than organizations with a different operating structure.

> Yeah, it's such a compelling question. It's such a live question. I mean, really, the question of sustainable business and funding models is the live question across the arts and culture. And for me personally and professionally it's the problem to work on. —Rémi Alie

The leap for an organization to reach the eligibility requirements of operating funding from the OAC can be extremely challenging for small organizations: non-profit status, be led by professional personnel, a range of revenue sources (government and private), and a significant annual operating budget.

In Northern Ontario, these are challenging requirements. Non-profit applications and maintenance require an extra layer of management that small groups may not have the capacity for, particularly prior to having the stability that operating funding provides, and the non-profit status may not best suit the membership and governance structure the group desires. Alternative sources of funding are limited in the North, particularly in small rural communities where there may be neither the population nor the business base to support donations and ticket sales. There are no dedicated foundations in the region, and only a few cities offer small grants to arts organizations, and none with the level of funding the Toronto Arts Council provides. While many groups are led by artists, the organizations and groups may not have the human resources capacity required to maintain professional personnel. Most significantly, given new and successful OAC operating applicants are typically granted between twelve and fifteen percent of their annual operating budget. Organizations therefore must make the leap into a significant operating budget which can be near impossible given the lack of alternative sources of funding, and while relying on one or two small grants per year (average project grants from the OAC are $12,000 to $15,000). To be eligible for an operating grant that would cover the hire of a full-time administrator would require a minimum $300,000 annual operating budget, which excludes all but a few organizations in the region.

Anong Beam, the former Artistic Director of the Ojibwe Cultural Foundation, revealed, in a *Toronto Star* article, that the CCA had declined an operating grant in 2017: "They said we aren't eligible because of institutional instability. I almost cried. Isn't that the definition

of an institution that needs core funding?"[5] Another anonymous arts administrator noted that the effort to bridge their organization to a $350-plus annual operating budget, and the requisite management of multiple project grants to gain that level of income came at a huge cost to the organization's internal capacity as they were stretched thin during that three-year process, leaving a significant impact on her own mental health and wellness. While the OCF has since received core funding from the CCA and gained a slight annual operating increase from the OAC, other small, yet important, arts organizations in the region feel the process and eligibility for essential core/operating funding remains elusive.

Northern Ontario Cities	Total Amount	Average Grant Amount	Number of Recipient Grants
ALL N ON Funding, Individual and Organization	**$ 439,298.00**	**$ 25,841.06**	**17**
Type: Organization	**$ 356,676.00**	**$ 29,723.00**	**12**
Sudbury	$ 209,243.00	$ 34,873.83	6
North Bay	$ 53,679.00	$ 17,893.00	3
South River	$ 93,754.00	$ 31,251.33	3
Type: Individual	**$ 120,622.00**	**$ 20,103.67**	**6**
Thunder Bay	$ 38,700.00	$ 19,350.00	3
Sudbury	$ 10,000.00	$ 10,000.00	1
North Bay	$ 10,000.00	$ 10,000.00	1
Sioux Lookout	$ 23,922.00	$ 23,922.00	1

17.6 Northern Ontario Cities, Clustered by OAC Funding Awarded, Average Grant Amount, and Number of Grants (Fiscal Year 2017-2018 to 2019-2020)

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5 See https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/visualarts/2017/11/17/canada-150-exposes-the-art-worlds-broad-divide.html.

The sector and its funders need to examine how to provide funding and support for established ad hoc collectives, unincorporated, and other small organizations, seeking to value their nimbleness and successes, and invest in work that has impact in the region, despite the size of the operating budget. It is worth noting that ad hoc collectives focus on the people—those involved in their programs but also the people involved in the collective itself. Without a formal board structure, ad hoc collectives are able to work collaboratively with a variety of people who can provide a range of practical, artistic, and management skills based on current needs rather than a prescribed board term. In contrast, boards can become driven by volunteers who may or may not have direct experience in non-profit or arts leadership. Individuals involved in ad hoc collectives are also able to be flexible and adaptable without the formal constraints of a board structure.

> We're thinking very seriously about the process of professionalizing right now, because we have a remarkable opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the unmet need in our broader region for programming that supports mental wellness and community. As an organization at the intersection of the arts and mental health, we have a partnership with the employment services of Nipissing First Nation to actually deliver programming into even more far-flung communities. And we realize that our organizational and administrative capacity needs to grow and needs to adapt. If we're going to deliver on this exciting programming, and if we're going to execute on our partnerships, we need more robust administrative capacity, more robust organizational capacity. And so we've been thinking about questions like: How do we holistically integrate, reimagining our administration and organizational capacity? How do we integrate that with more sustainable funding models? And how do both of those things support and enhance our partnerships? Those are the questions. Those are the big existential questions for us now. And we're seeking opportunities

to work through those. There's a design strategist and consultant that we would like to work with in order to pick through these big problems and put together a really clear roadmap for our organization and our programming for the next few years. But once again, we're stuck with the chicken and egg of seeking funding opportunities in order to reimagine our organizational capacity. It's not so much that we have a particular model in mind as that we've looked at the existing models and wanted to push back. We've looked at a traditional board model, for instance, and asked questions around: How can we make this more community responsive? Can we? How can we make this feel less formal to our community members, and to the people who we would be inviting to be part of this? —Rémi Alie

With so few institutions of support, and even fewer with operational or core funding and the capacity to undertake these additional responsibilities, it can be challenging for emerging and unincorporated groups to find the support they need to maintain and build their own capacity. There is potential to nest with other non-media arts organizations or to explore networked administrative resource sharing (this will take time and resources to think through carefully and to establish). In all cases, mentorship is cited as important for inter-organizational nesting and for artist-to-artist development (see more on mentorship here and here). Artists have noted there is a need for both informal and formal mentorship and ways to connect and support these mentorships, but noted it isn't simply a question of matching up organizations and artists. The mentor needs capacity (time, and skills, in the areas in demand, and skills in knowledge transfer), mentor training and support, which is sometimes less available than mentorship itself. It may be worth exploring organizational relationships, nesting and administrative/organizational mentorship more deeply, to determine what structures, approaches and supports are most effective in supporting informal/unincorporated groups to build capacity outside

of core funding toward building a stronger media arts ecosystem in the region.

Northern Ontario	# of Orgs
OAC	30
CCA	13
Both	8

17.7 Organizations with Sustained Funding from OAC/CCA in Northern Ontario (Fiscal Years 2017-2018 to 2019-2020)

Southern Ontario	# of Orgs
OAC	578
CCA	322
Both	120

17.8 Organizations with Sustained Funding from OAC/CCA in Southern Ontario (Fiscal Years 2017-2018 to 2019-2020)
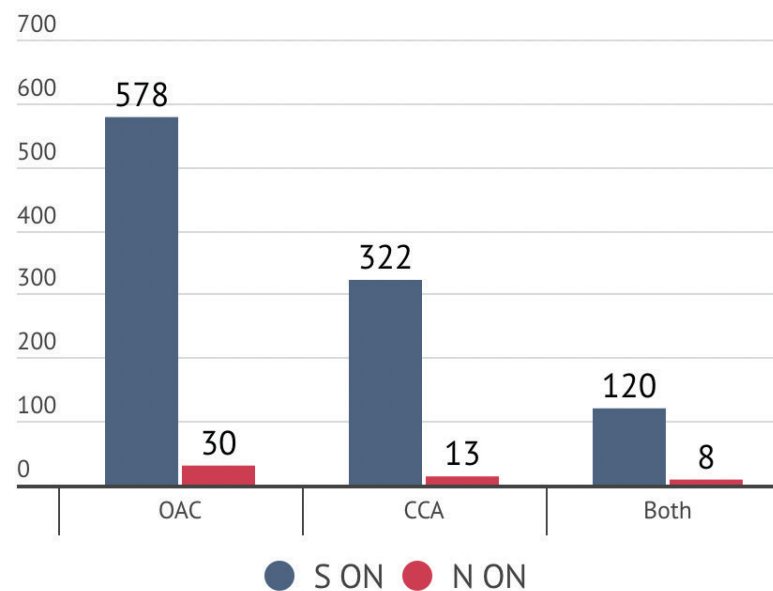
17.9 Bar Graph of Organizations with Sustained Funding from OAC/CCA in Northern and Southern Ontario (Fiscal Years 2017-2018 to 2019-2020)

It is not only sustained funding that would help develop scaffolded programs to support artists in the region, but funding allocations that match regional realities regarding distances, infrastructure, and expenditures. Generally speaking, the funding allocations that northern organizations receive do not address the real barriers of northern costs when compared to the funding allocations received by southern organizations, as well as the lesser availability of other sources of funding (such as ticket sales, business sector donations, local foundations, small municipalities without the capacity to provide grants). While grant numbers and amounts may be equitable based on population, the additional barriers in the region, the higher costs, the lesser availability of alternative sources of funding and local income generation need to be considered. According to Hills Strategies Report, during a 20-year period from 1991 to 2001, Northern Ontario showed an increase of artists (those declaring themselves as employed artists in the census), across several municipalities (with two municipalities registering decreases).[6]

> 1,600 artists in Northern Ontario, representing 0.4% of the labour force in northern parts of the province. This figure includes the 1,100 artists in Northeastern Ontario (0.4% of the region's labour force), 400 artists in Northwestern Ontario (also 0.4%), and 100 artists in the Far North (0.3%). (Hills Strategies, "Artists by Region in Ontario (based on the 2001 Census) Prepared for Ontario Arts Council")[7]

Table 26: Artists in northern Ontario municipalities						
Municipality	**County**	**Type**	**Number of artists**	**Overall labour force**	**Artists as %**	**Change in # of artists, 1991-2001**
Seguin	Parry Sound	TP	70	2,010	3.5%	17%
Cochrane	Cochrane	T	55	6,920	0.8%	n.r.
North Bay	Nipissing	C	185	26,530	0.7%	16%
Sault Ste. Marie	Algoma	C	175	36,190	0.5%	13%
Greater Sudbury	Sudbury	C	260	78,780	0.3%	-39%
Timmins	Cochrane	C	55	21,680	0.3%	-15%
Thunder Bay (northwest region)	Thunder Bay	C	290	56,770	0.5%	26%
Municipality types: C=City, T=Town, TP=Township, VL=Village						
n.r. = data not reliable						

17.10 "Table 26: Artists in Northern Ontario Municipalities" in *Artists By Region in Ontario*. Hills Strategies Report 2006.[8]

Two decades later, it is cogent to note funding decreases per artist and few organizations of support for artists, even if these numbers had remained stable.[9]

There are a number of schools in the region that provide film and media arts programs, municipalities and cities with varying commitment, capacity, and interest to support the arts (including granting programs), and film festivals and other organizations that are realizing that local resilience requires a cross–community ecosystem. Galleries like the new Between Pheasants Contemporary (see the case study here) has established itself in tandem with its international connections and presence through online platforms such as Instagram yet has maintained its hyperlocal context.

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6   It is worth noting that artists in the region earn significantly less money than others in the labour force. For instance, artists in Great Sudbury earned an average of $20,100, a 36% wage gap, and artist income in Sault Ste. Marie averaged $10,300, a 64% wage gap. While Sudbury and District is more populous, it also has more organizations of support and a more robust arts ecosystem, which may account for some of the disparity between artist incomes.

7   See https://hillstrategies.com/wp-content/uploads/1970/01/Artists_by_region_in_Ontario.pdf, 46. Manitoulin Island is a "hot spot" with its 80 professional artists representing 1.3% of the local labour force, and 1.1 % artist per capita ratio—above the national average.

8   Artists in Northern Ontario municipalities in Artists By Region in Ontario. Hills Strategies Report 2006, link: https://hillstrategies.com/wp-content/uploads/1970/01/Artists_by_region_in_Ontario.pdf and p. 47.

9   Cinéfest Sudbury/CION and Debajehmujig receive significant operating/core funding from both the CCA and the OAC and are well-staffed; New Adventures in Sound Art and Near North Mobile Media Lab have stability via their operating and core grants.

Given the lack of institutions of support, and the capacity challenges of most of those that exist, artists and organizations are exploring ways to build relationships with other arts and non-arts organizations, as well as to explore creative ways to cross-pollinate between communities and galleries for curatorial projects and to share administrative functions.

> Make connections with art and artists in other regions. There are artists on the Quebec side, and internationally that live in the middle of nowhere, but they have the same ideas.
>
> Partnerships, partnerships, partnerships, partnerships: do colleges around the area have tech programs? I know the l'UQAT (l'Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue) has a digital creation program. They have a BA and a master's and that's the engine that keeps people coming in. There are a lot of students that come in from Europe and China which creates a little motor. Those students bring in artists and different types of creators to work with them as a team. I think that could also be another model that we could look into in the future on the Ontario side, because eventually those colleges will have to do something a little more high tech— they need some kind of vision.
> —Dominic Lafontaine, *interdisciplinary artist, Timiskaming First Nation*

Lieann Koivukoski has decades of experience partnering with, and attempting partnerships with, the local film program at Canadore College and other film production companies. She has observed the processes and notes the hunger that local communities have for the "studio build" and exploration of new technologies. She reflects:

> Whenever anybody thinks about partnering with an institution, it just seems smart, right? It's an institution, they have guidelines, they have things that they should be following. If I look here at our college, and how they have proceeded over the last number

of years—because post-production was not the first run—they partnered with a company called Intelligent Creatures. So, Intelligent Creatures came into the college and the proposal was, they wanted to take 2D movies and make them 3D. They bought a whole bunch of equipment to do so. They set up a studio…it never got used. Because the thing is, it seems like a really good idea. But any company that's going to pay to have their 2D movie made into a 3D movie is going to send it somewhere where the labour is much cheaper. It will go to other countries with lower labour laws, and then it will just gather dust. And that's not the first time that's happened. I can probably name off a couple of other examples. But in terms of coming into these smaller communities, the proposal or the sell point is: if we build something, then we can employ people. And that gets communities excited, right? Okay. So, you're going to build this giant studio, what are you going to need in that giant studio and what's it going to look like? And well, it's going to be technicians that already know how to do the job that will be hired. And yes, they'll come into the community. Yes, they'll probably purchase homes. Yes, there'll be buying cars and food and you know, contributing to the economy, which is, again, not a negative thing. However, it's not a positive thing for the people that are already there. So that would be sort of investing into the labour, instead of so much the infrastructure. Infrastructure could come after. But if you really want to be able to provide for whoever it is that you're trying to serve, you need to have people that are trained to do so.

They're so hungry for northern people to fill positions, because then that means from a production standpoint, you're not paying for accommodations, you're not paying for per diem. You're not paying for travel costs. You want to be able to have the people with the skill set to do the jobs here. But I think when explaining to a municipality when they want to know about

the actual dollar amount...it's like building a pipeline, right? Everybody gets excited about building a pipeline, because then you got all these people that you're employing, well, what do you have after? Once it's built, what happens?
—Lieann Koivukoski, *Post Production North, North Bay*

Lieann observed that communities have established studios and other arts spaces that are unused—they remain empty or under-programmed after a number of years. She suggests that groups invest in the labour first and then develop the skills (for tech, administration, creation, dissemination, etc.). Following those components, build the infrastructure if there is capacity to support it in the long run, or explore how existing spaces can serve multiple purposes and organizations (arts and non-arts organizations) rather than creating new studios for each sector and each organization. This is particularly important in the North where there are so many rural communities that may have only a single arts organization. As a result, it can be difficult to create strong, equitable, and meaningful collaborations with organizations to enable emerging and unincorporated groups to develop, grow, and/or "nest" with a relevant senior organization.

The Compass program was the lone program at the OAC that enabled organizations to work with experts, consultants, and facilitators to help them navigate questions around sustainability, organizational models, structure, governance, strategic planning, and other high level organizational thinking. This program was closed in 2018 in response to the provincial cuts to the OAC. Even with Compass funding, however, the program didn't cover the cost for the organization's participation in this work—for under-funded groups, and organizations with a part-time or volunteer staff, this work can significantly drain resources and capacity.

At the CCA, there are Sector Innovation and Development grants that can support mentorship programs and new or developing organizational models. However, as these activities "must have an impact in the arts sector beyond a personal gain or benefit to your group or organization," an organization would have to design a project that addresses the needs of multiple organizations or the sector as a whole. While Art Fix of Nipissing and others, for example, would like this kind of expanded, sector-impacting thinking, the applicant organization may not have the organizational mission to do this kind of sector development work or the capacity to build the kinds of inter-organizational relationships and conversations required to establish the groundwork for this kind of grant submission. In a proactive strategy to address the gaps for marginalized and Indigenous groups, the CCA has identified that "Designated priority applicants applying for organizational capacity-building projects do not have to demonstrate this larger impact." This may be a fruitful funding stream for some groups in the region, however, as Northern Ontario is not a priority group (as it is at the OAC), groups like Art Fix, Mindful Makers, 180 Projects, and other small ad hoc collectives would not be eligible for this funding stream. As unincorporated entities they are further excluded from other funding sources, such as the Ontario Trillium Foundation, and the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation; and without a business case, they are not eligible for funding from FedNor.

For organizations, funding is a central concern, and constant pressure.

We've actually found the granting cycle, in some ways, a limiting experience, because it invites us to think about our projects and the way that we deliver programming in ways that just aren't feasible or that don't line up with our lived realities. To give an important example, in response to COVID, so many funding bodies have responded with digital access funds, opportunities to re-strategize and build digital capacity. That's great. And we have certainly gone after some of those opportunities, because there's capacity building we're excited about. But going online is not the same thing as making our programming accessible

to our communities. When we're talking about communities with satellite internet, YouTube videos don't work. And so we've encountered some complex conversations with funding partners who want, for instance, program delivery and capacity building to be separate project types. And it's been difficult for us to sort of have these conversations and say, work, capacity building, organizational design, and designing programming that meets our community's needs and meshes well with the community partners that we have in this context—these things shouldn't be at odds with one another. And too often they are. It's one real through line that I've encountered in terms of the concept or the motivating principle behind this particular [video game arts] project.

One of the really fundamental challenges we've encountered is, you know, places of incompatibility between the ways in which grant money is dispersed and the lived reality and the needs of our organization and of our community. As a northern arts organization, run by and for artists with lived experience of mental health and substance use, there's a certain act of translation that happens when there's a conversation between us and partners in Toronto, for instance, who are used to things like the assumption of functional internet and granting bodies that can look at their program design and recognize it as something that works with their reporting structures. —Rémi Alie

A central question is: how can small groups share curatorial, administrative, training, and other functions; maintain local relevance, control over their programming; and be able to steer direction and governance within these nested, networked, and collaborative structures? This question is relevant when considering the role of municipalities and cities. Most organizations and artists would agree that they have a role to play in supporting the arts sector; when local arts councils or regional ASOs are absent, it may be that municipalities,

economic development agencies, and other community development organizations have more capacity (human resources, funding, access to spaces) than small arts organizations. However, control over programming and governance, and the flexibility to be responsive, are critically important.

There is a need for artist-driven spaces that can curate critical and contemporary work, push boundaries and support radical projects, and create space for marginalized artists, while free from governance (including disciplining structures) by external organizations or dominant groups. There is a difficult balance to maintain by local governments and agencies between supporting and recognizing the impacts and values brought by arts and culture while avoiding the instrumentalization of arts or arts becoming a "service" to the objectives of local governments and agencies. This is particularly important because these governments and agencies hope to see tangible results from their investments, whether they are investing financially and/or administratively.

> We're [the Cultural Vitality Committee] not the Supreme Soviet of Arts and Culture in Sault Ste. Marie. We don't get to tell artists what to do. We don't get to. We're not directing arts and culture development. We're supposed to play a facilitative role. And early on, that's what I felt. Yes, we can support projects. But they should be driven by artists within the community. Or collaborations of artists and other organizations, these sorts of things. But it is a sort of underlying thread of concern where sometimes…I think that it's important for us to continue to bear this in mind as committee members. We play partly a facilitative role, partly a catalyzing role, but we're not a director, we're not directing those processes. Or what we should be doing is trying to support artists to do what they want to do, to connect them to capacity building opportunities, and to encourage the arts and culture community however broadly you define that. [Regarding municipal grants], we have to be able

to protect artists from censorship, right, like these, these grants should be similar to Ontario Arts Council or Canada Council, right, where, you know, we're funding artistic production or operations of artistic organizations, but we're not there to tell you, not to do something, and that can't be part of our criteria. —Sean Meades

Throughout this research project, artists cited the need for analogue/ on-site spaces and some kind of organizing infrastructure to support artists and organizations, including regional and local networks, regional advocacy, promotion, a regional arts investment fund, and the possibility of a regional ASO (or regional branches of existing ASOs). Decentralized models can help reduce the risk of flattening the textured contexts of local communities, diverse experiences, and varied access of artists across the region. But as already noted, there aren't existing organizations or infrastructure to provide these services. There are few local arts councils that have the capacity, mandate, expertise, or representation. The loss of the Northeastern Representative position at the OAC has further reduced support to the region; and interviewees noted that the CCA has little reach or presence in the region.

> What I've heard is a simple solution—just have one organization, have them do it all—which is totally ridiculous because there are too many things for one organization to do. I'm not really sure about the functionality of it, how it could possibly work. The northeast is different than the northwest, and there are Francophone, Indigenous, and Anglophone communities. It really boils down to, what can you do at the community level? I think that's a more manageable level. Develop strong networks and information flows within the communities and have them connect to other organizations on a broader scale, across locales, creating a collaboration of collaborations. —Dr. Jude Ortiz

An in-depth analysis of organizational/representative infrastructure was beyond the scope of this project, but merits further research, conversation, and strategy building. While we do not have a particular model to suggest, this research, based on feedback from participants, suggests that a single model, and the typical representative model, is unlikely to meet the needs of the region. We further noted that approaches to organizational infrastructures need to be framed so that they are adaptive and flexible, collaborative, networked (and possibly nested), and able to change leadership regularly. In some ways, these approaches underscore the strengths of ad hoc collectives. The experience of ad hoc collectives and their focus on the people and the programming over organizational structures is similar to the kinds of conversations that are emerging regarding how to (or not to) organize arts media organizations and supports in the region.

The complexities of the region, and within each community, suggest that it may be worth exploring decentralized networks of local animators/organizers. There are no ASOs in the region to do this work or organizations with the mandate to represent the region, advocate, and articulate the social, economic, and cultural value of the sector or build regional capacity (apart from the NORDIK Institute, which is not an arts sector organization, and CION, whose mandate and reach is limited). This work, which is often necessary work that facilitates the capacity of organizations to do their day-to-day programming, falls on the staff and volunteers working in arts organizations, individuals, members, and other local volunteers. They do this work in addition to their regular duties, which further stretches organizations already at the limit of their capacity, contributes to exhaustion, and leads to a variety of organizational dysfunctions, such as gatekeeping. We know that many organizations (both organized and informal) support the community in ways that are well beyond their formal mandates by trying to address and include the need for community engagement, organizing, advocacy, and professional development among other needs in the community. Our research and conversations with a variety of individuals and

organizations in this sector point to how imperative it is to support this labour and by doing so to help grow and develop capacity and meet the mandates of funders and ASOs. The arts sector, in general, has had to be inventive in its terms of community supports and its use of resources, projects, and programming—this has become clearly highlighted after the Ford government cut OAC funding to Northern Ontario artists and organizations
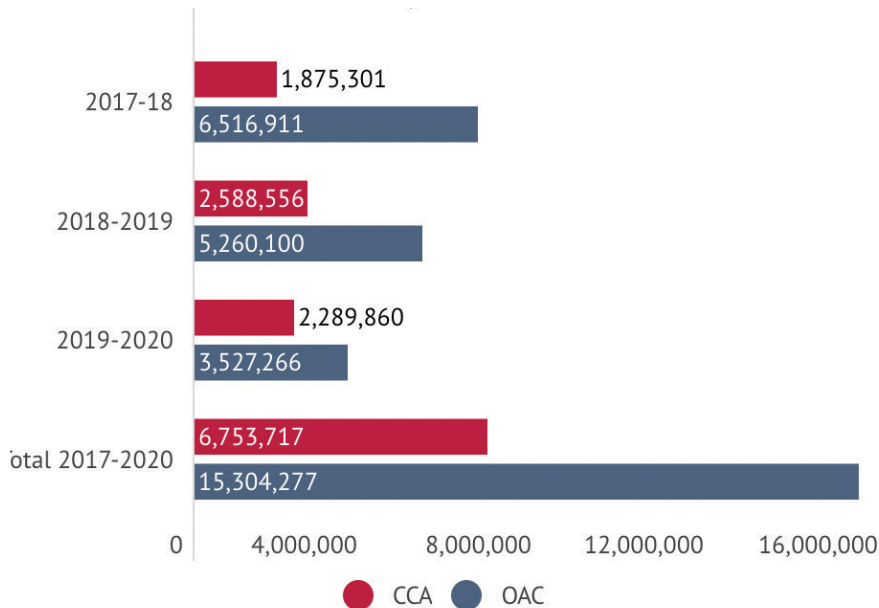
17.11 Total CCA/OAC Grant Amounts for Organizations and Groups (Fiscal Years 2017-2018 to 2019-2020)

It makes abundant sense for individuals in the community to become animators/organizers because they are already committed to the community and are recognized by the community as being "in the know"; they are networked and experienced; they understand local contexts and needs; they know the local resources; and they have the social and professional relationships to be able to support other artists. Dr. Jude Ortiz, the Senior Research Coordinator at NORDIK (Northern Ontario Research Development and Knowledge) Institute,

affiliated with Algoma University, calls these networked, well-connected and in-the-know artists, "magpies."[10]

> I think you would probably need three full-time people based in Sault Ste. Marie alone who act, for lack of a better word, as "magpies." Community developers, arts administrators, call them what you will, but they are the magpies of the community. You have a question? Oh, here, I know where to find it. They're the go-to person who really understands what's happening, the local context, and they understand it because they've been there for a while. It's all about connectivity. That's their specialty. They have their relationships and networks, and they know how to find and share information. They're their community connectors, they're animators, they're researchers, they're diggers, they're people that make connections easily. You meet them once and they remember who you are.
>
> Three people in Sault Ste. Marie, full-time permanent positions that connect with two or three people in Timmins who are doing the same thing. These people aren't necessarily affiliated with one organization or another. I think that's what's needed. And it has to be separate, independent funding. I think one source of this money should be the Ontario Arts Council's organizational funding. The organizational funding is funding people in each community, that's the organization. It's a structural organization, not a not a community organization.
> —Dr. Jude Ortiz

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10 Field catalyst is a currently circulating term that encapsulates Jude's "magpie." "As the number of Collective Impact initiatives increases, there is a growing need to foster better alignment and synergy between them. Field catalysts are uniquely positioned to identify and facilitate opportunities for coordination among complementary Collective Impact initiatives." See Sylvia Cheuy, Mark Cabaj, and Liz Weaver, "How Field Catalysts Accelerate Collective Impact," Stanford Social Innovation Review, January 4, 2022, .

Dr. Ortiz notes that this can be through "an individual within a multi-local/e organizational structure." Systems change and collective impact require these kinds of elements—in the sense of advocacy, conversation, and change making. The emphasis is on the people and the change, not the structure.

One idea that had some energy in the conversations was to establish an animator in each community/local area. For example, to establish two or three animators in a mid-sized community, such as Thunder Bay, Sault Ste. Marie, and North Bay. The next step would be to establish an animator in a smaller community or rural area. The data from the CCA and OAC reflects these kinds of reciprocal relations: where there are institutions of support and other experienced artists, we see clusters grow through the influences, supports, and forms of visibility that galleries, senior artists, and established organizations bring to the community.

A strategy that could be implemented with stages is to focus on and invest in the individuals (artists and organizers) that have experience, talent, and the relationships to support the media arts in their community or sector. They would receive support to do their engagement work at the local level and would be mandated to engage artists, network with local organizations and projects, advocate, share information, connect artists and organizations, and communicate/network with animators from other communities. They would serve a needed organizing, relational, and support function. To respond to the shifting dynamics of communities, they would serve a term of two to three years, when the position would transition to a new animator/magpie, to avoid the entrenchment of particular approaches, any problematic community relations, and embedded power. The animators would be supported financially, receive training (granting programs, mentorship training, etc.) from ASOs, funders, and other agencies, and be part of a regional network: what Dr. Ortiz calls a "collaboration of collaborations."

Historically, it would have been difficult to connect local animators, however the increasingly ubiquitous virtual world makes it possible for many communities to connect remotely with online training, networking, mentoring, and other forms of outreach and training. The animator/magpie/organizer role would eliminate or lessen the need for the typical investment pattern of investing in human resources and finding the financial resources to establish formal organizations or local councils. There is evidence that, without change, these organizations do not function well; they become cemented in certain patterns of representation, gatekeeping, and infighting, along with eventual burnout and capacity fatigue. These networked approaches also offer a way of avoiding implementing a regional organization that might never be able to represent the region and its textured landscape, in favour of connecting artists and communities through community knowledge networks and resource sharing methods that are already active and practiced.

The importance, and relevance of the hyperlocal and the networked local (via the digital, and intra-community) has relevance within discussions about local decision-making related to funding from the arts councils, particularly the OAC, given its particularly important role for emerging artists and organizations in the region. The OAC, currently and in the past, has enabled artists more access points to funding support via micro-grants. In the region, artists have access to both Exhibition Assistance (EA) grants (which have been used by media artists) and Indigenous Visual Arts Materials (IVAM) grants. Both programs are vetted by "recommenders."[11]
These micro-grant applications are simpler than those of regular granting streams, making them much more accessible entry grants

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11   In Northern Ontario these include the following IVAM recommenders: Ojibwe Cultural Foundation in M'Chigeeng First Nation on Manitoulin Island and Wikwemikong Heritage Organization (IVAM); and for Exhibition Assistance: 180 Projects (Sault Ste. Marie), Art Gallery of Sudbury, Definitely Superior (Thunder Bay), Pictograph Gallery (Atikokan), Timmins Museum, White Water Gallery (North Bay), the Galerie du Nouvel-Ontario (Sudbury), the Conseil des Arts de Hearst, and the Ojibwe Cultural Foundation (M'Chigeeng First Nation).

for emerging artists. Local organizations vet and support these programs; they aim to use local expertise and community knowledge to determine successful applicants. The programs have generally been successful in reaching both new and established artists. It's not clear, however, if applicants are transitioning from micro-grants into regular program streams, particularly within the IVAM program. It is important to note that IVAM typically doesn't attract media arts applicants (serving primarily craft and visual artists). The programs do not provide remuneration to the recommenders, either, which puts additional pressure and responsibilities on sometimes already stretched organizations.

These are significant issues which need to be addressed for those programs and any future micro-grants. However, the need to stream applicants into regular funding programs signals that the micro programs should be continued and expanded to support media artists through broadening of the eligibility criteria for IVAM and creating a media arts specific materials program and/or micro-grant. The programs should also be further promoted with the media arts organizations and artist networks in the North. Of importance is to explore how the model of locally vetted micro-grants can further supplement regular funding programs to reach communities, particularly remote and Indigenous, that aren't accessing current micro-grants or streaming into regular granting streams. It must be noted that these recommendations for continued and expanded micro-granting programs and local vetting are not intended to either diminish or replace the existing jury system of the arts councils, as peer review is a foundational and an extremely important process of the arts councils.

However, conversations throughout the region point to the possibilities of targeted, highly local sub-juries associated with additional micro-grants that might be piloted to address gaps in access and contribute to building stronger media arts ecosystems in the region, particularly in areas where there aren't currently very strong (or are non-existent)

media arts clusters. Fly-in communities are historically under-represented in both applications and success rates. Some of the reasons that artists do not apply include the fact that the criteria doesn't represent them (e.g., they don't see themselves in the criteria); they are intimidated by, uncomfortable with, or don't have capacity to apply; they don't trust the sharing of their information with a government agency; and/or they were not aware of the funding. The limited application numbers are partly to do with the small number of media artists in very small communities. This is complicated by the fact that media artists tend to leave their rural communities to gain access to media arts education and to build their arts practices (see Alexander Rondeau and Jordan Fiddler for example [here] and [here]) and signals a need for expanded access to professional and career development both through the digital and on the ground.

The limited application to media arts and other funding streams by Northern Ontario media artists, particularly in rural areas, are also partly attributable to whether or not emerging artists are aware of funding programs, whether they or not they see themselves reflected in the grants, and whether or not they have the capacity to apply. In addition, when emerging applicants do submit to regular program streams, their applications tend to be less successful due to the lack of strength in their applications as a whole. They do not have the experience and career development paths that southern and urban emerging artists can claim. Northern artists can benefit in their application process by exploring digital networks and out of region exhibitions to gain experience and credibility beyond the North, and to utilize strategic granting to bolster career development opportunities.

> I find if you're making work for the right reasons, then the work involved with distribution, the business side of things, usually falls by the wayside. I find that for myself and for most of my friends that are artists, this seems to be where we all kind of fail. It's probably where artists need the most help because if they're

doing it for the right reasons they're already focused on the next piece of work. They're not doing it to get it seen, necessarily. That's where a curator comes in. That's where an art distributor or something comes in. I would say, next to funding and just like the initial onset of becoming able to get your work made, that this is the next most important thing. Especially being in the North you're so much further from the big art networks and infrastructure that the cities have. —Zach Cassidy

In addition to these gaps in the region, artists from remote communities are vetted by juries that don't typically reflect them (one Indigenous representative on a jury cannot speak for, or know all communities, artists, and their community relationships). Artists who have served on committees have noted that they have seen both great projects with weakly written applications that don't receive funding and slickly written projects that do receive funding despite poor community relations. Jurors may be unfamiliar with the realities of the artists from fly-in and remote communities. These contexts have led to some suggestions from participants for a pilot project that would create area-based sub-juries to evaluate applications. The advantages would be that an area-based, local jury will know the community realities, artists, and contextual relations. Juries from the south (and from southern Northern Ontario) do not necessarily understand these nuances. A further suggestion was to support a local "magpie" to help build awareness of funding programs and assist with grant applications, in combination with their role as a local animator. Local juries might also be candidates for targeted professional development funding.

The CCA is another major funding body that offers funding for northern artists. It has been suggested that the CCA could help develop the Northern Ontario media arts sector through strategic and targeted programs aimed to build media arts organizational capacity; use funding for critical writing and review of exhibitions to build the profile of

mid-career and established artists (and strong emerging artists); and support exhibitions, screenings, and other forms of digital dissemination.

Both councils, working with national and provincial Arts Service Organizations, might also examine how they might expand their presence in the region and assist organizations and artists navigate the funding environment.

What these conversations suggest:

Institutions of support/clusters: The research conversations conducted for this report, and data collected and analyzed from the CCA and OAC granting agencies, support the fact that the development and growth of media clusters are strongly related to the presence of institutions of support and sustainable funding in communities and across the region. It is also clear that institutions of support and funding are dispersed inequitably throughout the region. Strategic funding is required to support in-depth and meaningful conversations, research, and strategy development to explore how to build capacity and infrastructure. While the issues are complex and responses may need to be applied in different ways to parts of the region, what is clear is that the funding "numbers" do not account for a chronic lack of resources and substantially differing expenses for northern artists and organizations. The realities in Northern Ontario do not seem to be considered when allocating funding and considering how "far" the funding goes toward projects in the North. This includes the "in-kind" support that local resource networks provide to southern counterparts, and the absence (or overdrawn capacity) of those valued resources in Northern Ontario.

Mentorship and nesting: It is important to investigate organizational relationships and nesting and institutional mentorship more deeply to determine what structures, approaches, and supports can be most

effective in supporting informal/unincorporated groups to build capacity outside of core funding and to build a stronger media arts ecosystem in the region. It is equally important to recognize benchmarks and shifts in organizational relationships over time and to reassess supports and needs.

Decentralization and networked approaches: It is important to focus on "nimble magpies"—the animators of networks who act as functioning liaisons between networks within communities or sectors. They provide an essential service that links artists and organizations and communities and should have access to financial support, with training, to continue to build a robust media arts sector in the North. They underpin networks and act as "people-as-infrastructure," animators within communities who are turned to and often work informally, beyond capacity and without support in advisory and liaison roles on behalf of the creative sector. The sorts of advice and guidance includes how to navigate the funding sector, capacity building, professional development, networking, organizing, and building visibility.

Calls for decentralized approaches and for local juries to vet applications (particularly in remote communities) does not signal a need to dismantle the jury process at the Arts Councils or any existing Arts Service Organizations. It indicates a need for scaffolding and advocates for outreach and access for existing programs and organizations.

Definitions and funding eligibility: Organizations and individual artists are calling on funding agencies to revisit the eligibility requirements of all programs, and for operating funding programs to be more flexible and inclusive of well-established ad hoc groups and collectives that demonstrate artistic merit and impact.

Pilots and strategic funding: Dedicated and strategic funding programs to help build organizational infrastructure in the region is necessary as a result of Compass and the lack of programs that support

capacity building, networking, and sector development in the region. Provincial government cuts to the OAC eliminated the funding for arts service projects and the necessary support it provided to the region. One suggested method for repositioning and providing funding support may emerge if funders (OAC/CCA) convened gatherings, or provide targeted funding for, gatherings with representatives from emerging and ad hoc collectives (e.g., cover the costs and co-ordination expenses and ensure that communities define the parameters of the gatherings). In addition, funders could expand micro-grant eligibility, such as IVAM, to include media arts related expenses and consider instigating new micro-grants that can contribute to building the media arts ecosystem. Bolstering the arts ecosystem in Northern Ontario would be further aided by the following: building media arts organizational capacity; building the profile of mid-career and established artists (and strong emerging artists) through funding for critical writing and review of exhibitions; and supporting exhibitions, screenings, and other forms of digital dissemination.

The community liaison, or nimble "magpie" may be worth considering as a pilot with combined funding from the OAC, CCA, NOHFC, provincial Arts Service Organizations, and possibly local Community Future Development Corporations. This would help evaluate the efficacy of an expanded presence in the region and applications into the programs and contribute to capacity building of artists and organizations through assistance navigating the funding environment. Targeted pilots could explore expanded and additional micro-granting and local jury processes.

**ANDREA PINHEIRO—
180 PROJECTS:**
NAVIGATING CAPACITY
+ CARE-FULL CURATION

Katie Huckson, *Impossible/necessary* (2018). Mixed media. Installation view from *Habitations* group exhibition at 180 Projects (Sault Ste. Marie).

ANDREA PINHEIRO | 180 PROJECTS: NAVIGATING CAPACITY AND CAREFUL CURATION

> For me, the purpose was always to try and connect artists from here, with artists in other communities.
> —Andrea Pinheiro, *interdisciplinary artist; founder and director, 180 Projects; Chair, Department of Music and Visual Art, Algoma University, Sault Ste. Marie*

In 2012, Andrea Pinheiro founded 180 Projects in Baawaating/Sault Ste. Marie. Andrea co-financed the 180 Projects space, which includes exhibition space for professional artists along with Algoma University Fine Arts students, meeting and workshop spaces, as well as personal residences, and artists' studios on the upper level.

Originally from Kingston, Andrea began her undergraduate studies at White Mountain Academy of the Arts in Elliot Lake.[1] But like others in the region who were interested in advanced degrees in fine art and curatorial studies (see the case study on Alexander Rondeau/Between Pheasants Contemporary [here](#)), she left the region to receive her MFA from the University of Alberta. She has since completed a residency at the Banff Centre for the Arts and a curatorial residency at the Helen Pitt Gallery in Vancouver. In 2011, she was hired as an Assistant Professor in the Fine Arts Department at Algoma University in Sault Ste. Marie, where she became the department Chair. Her differing roles as an assistant professor at the university and as the founder and curator of 180 Projects sometimes requires navigation. Andrea's interest in establishing 180 Projects is aligned with her own experiences as an artist and curator and extends to her teaching in the Fine Art Department at Algoma University.

Andrea works in print, mixed media, paint, drawing, video, and installation, and has exhibited across Canada and internationally. Her personal art practice and methodology includes the exploration of relations between materials, representation, and gesture through the application of organic materials and paint to photographs. She expands the boundaries of photographic representation by exploring other processes, such as video, installation, and mixed media. Her training, curatorial, and exhibition circuits inform her approach and influences the work of 180 Projects and her students.

Her sensibility is derived from a located practice and environmental ethos; these are key to her curatorial practices and teaching approaches. Her students' work resonates, in subtle or obvious ways, with her interests and their own. As part of its exhibition cycle, 180 Projects shows student work, exposing them to the local community and arts practitioners. These interconnections between Andrea and the students, in combination with their interests as artists, expand local considerations of art and art practices. Andrea is increasingly interested in the relations between craft, land-based practices, and how these very contextual and local practices converse between places and within online digital practices. While the gallery space is important, another main goal has always been to "promote discourse on and exposure to a wide range of contemporary and experimental art practices."[2] 180 Projects has evolved and expanded over time; it generates a lively circuit of community and national relationships and networks, is inclusive of other established and emergent artists and collectives and offers opportunities for local and visiting artists and cultural workers at any stage of their career. More recently, in response to the pandemic, 180 Projects has reconfigured how it connects artists and arts practitioners by adapting its presence to include digital platforms. This flexibility has influenced the types

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1 The Academy, which opened in 1998, was based in the small rural community of Elliot Lake. With fully equipped studios, the Academy sought to combine European and First Nations approaches to painting, photography, graphic design, and other arts forms. It closed permanently in 2006.

2 See https://180projects.org/mandate-and-values.

of conversations that happen among artists within the extended arts community, locally, regionally, and nationally.

180 Projects is among a handful of artist-run centres in the region; it provides a space for contemporary, experimental, and under-represented work, and aims to activate critical discourse on art and culture. While Andrea's goal to connect artists responds to the isolation that Northern Ontario artists experience, other multi-layered and sophisticated considerations inform her work and mandate at 180 Projects. The ability to navigate and understand the relations between very local spaces and how they contribute to broader contexts and circuits is critical. It is this work, and the relevant deeper conversations it compels, that interests Andrea and the members of 180 Projects.

There are local museums, privately run commercial galleries, and other spaces that exhibit and sell art in the region. Owners and curators, however, who are not actively engaged in cross-regional conversations and critical curatorial practices are less able to foster a critical audience or establish high visibility and relationships for the artist or the exhibition space. The lack of a deeper discourse is especially highlighted when considered within the contexts of contemporary arts circuits and their broader regional scales. It is striking that some of the most critically relevant work that has been created and curated across the region reflects an awareness of these relations and opportunities for discourse between artists and curators. (For more about Visibility see [here](#)). Their awareness develops essential conversations and connections with and among other artists, their work, their audience, and the curators and spaces that exhibit critical and contemporary work.

Many organizations offer member shows, which is one way to provide exposure for the artists, who often also reciprocate with donating time as volunteers. 180 Projects isn't a member-based organization, and while they are governed by a Board of Directors (composed primarily by artists) the gallery wasn't established to provide a space for its Board

of Directors, members, or artist-leaders. Their vision and mandate is geographically and conceptually broader—they aim to act as a catalyst to activate contemporary and experimental practices and promote discourse. The curatorial impetus emerges from their interactions with and observations of contemporary conversations and circuits, rather than the work produced by a specific membership in a specific year. Local and regional arts organizations that provide member shows draw artists-as-members, but as Andrea points out:

> Lots of artists join organizations because they'll have the member exhibitions, but do those exhibitions really provide value for those people? And this is where, I think, if we do this sort of decentralizing [working with other collectives and groups around the region], we might be able to provide more value for our members if they're getting connections to communities outside of here, rather than just having the same show every two years in the same place. —Andrea Pinheiro

Similarly, member-based organizations in the region tend to be heavily focused on visual arts and restrictive. In many cases media arts (even sometimes photography) practices are not eligible for membership. Andrea acknowledges that there are still many people who are interested in painting and other more traditional arts practices, but 180 Projects is primarily interested in creating space for more experimental work that includes projects from the performance, video, media, and installation domains.

> In presentations that we made to City Hall about the Cultural Plan, councillors said, "Well, there's not enough Group of Seven in this document." That's an overriding element, or a figure that's there, even in the Art Gallery [of Algoma]. When I try to get an exhibition for the students for their end of year show, we can't because they have to have Groups of Seven on display all year round. You know, I love lots of their paintings, especially

the small ones, but it's this thing that this region has clung on to despite their work being made all across Canada.
—Andrea Pinheiro

Andrea has long considered the questions that her students at Algoma ask about art and its function such as whether art should just be uplifting and entertaining or if it should play a larger or more meaningful role. In parallel to the digital shift in education that occurred with the pandemic, Andrea has observed a shift in what students are creating and how they are thinking about their work. Just as Adrian Vilaca, of Borderline Radio, is actively curating the hyperlocal to create a niche within the limitless scope of the internet (For more about Borderline Radio, see here), a thoughtful approach to what comes in from the internet into the local is equally relevant. The increasing prevalence of the internet and digital applications in making, disseminating, and learning requires focus with respect to using digital forms as well as the management and perception of them.

With the upper-year classes, I was assigning projects where they had to attend different artist talks or online events, just because I found I was getting so much out of attending online talks myself. Most of the ones that I've attended, or that students have, conferences or presentations, they're not arts-specific necessarily, or if they are, they're very interdisciplinary. Most have been connected to food and sustainability practices in different ways. Maybe that's because that's where a lot of my interests are too. So, there's always very holistic approaches to them. And maybe it's just coincidence that most of these projects that I've looked at have been connected with food and place and plants. In the classes, though, I found with the upper-year courses there's actually maybe more connectivity among the group, and more productivity [since the onset of the pandemic]. They're making more, and very engaged, work this term. That was really, really nice to see. Often the lower-level students are doing their

research via Pinterest and social media. So that's where they're seeing all their work, and you can't even blame them when so much of what [they explore is what] comes up in search engines first. A lot of that usually shifts though as they're going through the program, and we try to introduce them to more artists and research strategies. I know the people that we can bring in as visiting artists and visiting speakers have a huge impact and end up being a sort of vehicle for students and local artists to connect with other artists.

I think there's the potential for things to be emerging more and more that are going to have this integration between craft practices, and land-based practices. The direction that I want to see our [Algoma University] program go in is much more land based, ecological based, decolonizing, and Indigenous based. That's what I see is the big potential to come out of this place.
—Andrea Pinheiro

Many Indigenous artists, and increasing numbers of settler artists, are working within a land-based and environmental ethos, interested in site-specificity and located practices (often outside of the physical studio and gallery). Simultaneously, the digital world is both ubiquitous and an important tool for artists trying to engage other artists and audiences in Northern Ontario and other regions, nationally and globally. Andrea grapples with how these physical and virtual spaces interact and how to anticipate and monitor their trajectories and the possible ramifications for artists and galleries. She considers how there can be viable integrations of these spaces within the context of new collaborations and trends toward decentralization and the local.

I think that's why on the one hand, personally, I'm just less and less invested in the gallery space. Or even in the studio space. I want to work outside as much as possible. And deconstructing the trope of the studio. I always thought the studio was this

super desired thing, you know. Getting to have one in school was amazing, getting to have access to all the equipment. But then most of the time I know that the biggest leaps or shifts I would make in my work was when I didn't have studios and I was working in my kitchen. And then coming here [to Sault Ste. Marie], I finally had this great big studio space, and I found it more overwhelming and more of a burden than anything. So then working outside and having work emerge out of being in the bush and on the land is much more fulfilling.

Physical gallery spaces are important to artists and to local audiences. As Andrea says, within the "very local, in the few blocks radius of the place, it does matter to the people in that neighborhood." For artists, the gallery's physical space fosters connections in a local sense—it offers a tangible way to exhibit work and connect with artists and audiences. One can engage with the work in-person, in an immediate, sensory way at the scale of the body, and among or with others within the dynamics of the neighbourhood.

180 Projects and other organizations curating contemporary work offer possibilities and opportunities for northern artists to exhibit their art in ways that expand the range of artistic production. Their efforts counter the isolation and insularity that artists in the region experience. 180 Project's relevance is partly due to their commitment to the local while they simultaneously engage artists and artist networks, foster critical conversations, and develop an increased capacity to facilitate and curate important work. They operate across a range of digital and analogue platforms and yet are also, in tandem, integrated with the spaces of the local.

> One of the things I've been most interested in over this last year is how the different artist-based talks are, to me, building a lot more value than exhibitions, per se…the incredible array of talks and panels and conversations being hosted all around the world.

If you still have access to some physical spaces to be able to build installations and document them, that's an incredible asset, but I think then the linkages that can be made, having multiple different exhibitions within a platform, that would be really wonderful. I know, for us, it would be really wonderful.
—Andrea Pinheiro

Artists are exploring how digital spaces can translate, present, and amplify their work. Some are grappling with how their work (such as tactile or embodied, or spatial and dimensional) might transfer or interface with a digital platform or translate appropriately into a digital form. Digital shifts affect the macro systems that artists work within. The realities of global economics and capital flows raise questions about how to situate and centre the local when globalization is a huge economic and social influence—how do these dynamics affect the strategies of artists and communities aiming to make art and art production more visible, yet simultaneously more local?

The benefits of innovation and stability to what is "local" is not lost on leadership invested in maintaining and developing future growth. As a way to foster its local economy, for example, the City of Sault Ste. Marie has adopted "Four Pillars": economic growth and diversity; social equity; cultural vitality; and environmental sustainability. Andrea supports these goals and their interactions; she notes that for many local artists, at least until recently, local markets and "driving festivals" such as the Sylvan Valley and the Deer Trail tours were economic drivers. Artists benefited from some financial stability (they could survive) through selling their art and interacting in person, locally.

180 Projects firmly establishes that both locally and digitally exhibited art—from the community alongside work from other regions—can be powerful demonstrations of local and global reach. Yet, understanding these relations and the ability to activate hybrid digital/analogue spaces have increasing impact. Andrea, and 180 Projects, are evaluating the sorts

of future adaptations that the organization could accommodate. For example, 180 Projects could continue with its current physical space; it could engage in forms of collaboration across the region and use other spaces; or it could develop toward operating in a collaborative or cooperative relationship with other groups in Sault Ste. Marie. Andrea would like to see more informal networks and collaborations between communities, and also between less and more established organizations and artist-run centres, as a means to build strong connections across the North. Andrea notes that 180 Projects is evolving; they have already developed collaborations with some ad hoc collectives and emerging curators, such as Decoupé Projects, in the region. Decoupé Projects is a collective, formed by Alexander Rondeau, Marilyn Adlington, and Alex Gregory, that collaborated with 180 Projects as a way to establish links to Toronto. While their collaborations will be discussed in greater detail further in this chapter, they share an interest in building conversations about critical issues in contemporary art practice in Northern Ontario.

180 Projects is exploring how these networks—and these networked locals—might expand their initial goal to connect artists, and, by doing so, continue to increase their own capacity to support artists. One potential drawback of focusing exclusively on the local is that the local experience, if accomplished with unvarying circuits and interactions, along with low capacity at the organizational level, can lead to burnout. Re-energizing organizational capacity and enabling exposure for artists can be achieved by building relationships and collaborating with other networks and organizations that exist elsewhere.

> By decentralizing I think it might neutralize some of [those issues], because, you know, we're working on this bigger thing. And it's not just about our community; it's our community in relation to other communities, essentially. And ideally, then local people wouldn't rely so much on exhibition opportunities at 180 Projects because they're now connected to potential opportunities and other communities. So, their horizons expand.

And then there isn't the sense that, Oh, this is the only place where I can show some work. —Andrea Pinheiro

Andrea felt that 180 Projects' initial collaboration with Decoupé to establish links with Toronto was "really important." Their first collaborative grant application was unsuccessful, but it fostered a connection that led, over the last three years especially, to exchanges between 180 Projects members and Alexander Rondeau, who now curates Between Pheasants Contemporary. (For more about BPC and Alexander Rondeau's curatorial practice, see here). As a result of their ongoing artistic and curatorial relationships, Andrea, Alexander, and a few other artists are exploring the possibility of hosting a Northern Ontario biennale that profiles contemporary Northern Ontario artists and work. This would gather artists together to talk about critical issues in contemporary arts practice. These decentralized, collaborative, cross-regional collaborations require multi-staged strategic thinking at the organizational level to contend with the complexities of curatorial decisions, such as who—which curator and which local—guides the collaboration. Careful consideration, aligned with strategic thinking, will inform the inclusion of particular locals and artists, the kinds of work and who disseminates it, and how conversations are engaged and developed. Andrea envisions an expansive network, with collaborations that

> operate in multiple venues and have people running it in multiple places, and then the workload could be distributed, and all these other skills brought in. That to me is really exciting and it makes you want to stay committed to the work. But it's a matter of maintaining that momentum and the energy to do it. One of the things that we are thinking about right now is trying to connect more with other curatorial groups and arts groups in places like North Bay, and trying to potentially decentralize organizations. So, it doesn't necessarily rely on the physical space and then to hopefully build a broader network. Increasingly, I'm seeing there's less and less that I can do. There's lots that I want

to do. But what I can take on responsibly is limited.
—Andrea Pinheiro

She notes that this kind of decentralization might also include other possibilities in how gallery space is used or what constitutes the gallery space. In this dynamic, organizations and curators could activate,

> pop-up type exhibitions in all different sites, not just in white cube sort of spaces. It might open up a lot more possibilities, especially in really thinking through decolonizing gallery practices rather than having this space that we are tied to.
> —Andrea Pinheiro

Andrea is no stranger to talking with artists and curators elsewhere. She maintains her international networks. For example, she participated in a SIM Residency and two exhibitions in Reykjavik, Iceland, in 2018. That experience established a relationship between Sault Ste. Marie and Iceland; it encouraged other artists to participate in residencies there and a cross-pollinating network emerged. But there are limitations— without funding, expansion of networks, and increased dialogue, these connections can only go so far:

> One of the things that I think I've always struggled with at 180 Projects, and the OAC [Ontario Arts Council] has brought it up too because they said to me, "What would you have done if you were curating according to your vision?" and I haven't ever done that. There have been opportunities that have come up that definitely would be part of that. But without having had the funding to go seek out exhibitions, it's a mixture of working with proposals that come in or exhibitions that have been funded through other groups, like the residential school centre, or other opportunities that just sort of land on the plate. I've always been really hesitant about making it about what I want to show. But at the same time, I realized there's something I'm also

missing out on, shaping some of the dialogue that I'd like to see happening here. So that's just always been a really big, personal struggle for me. —Andrea Pinheiro

180 Project's website and virtual collegial and curatorial networks have been the primary components of their digital presence. The website provides an important function as an archive, but it has limitations. Andrea recognizes that the website could be more dynamic. Just before the pandemic, 180 Projects was exploring new ways of using digital media to showcase art through and across spaces: between the in-gallery space and the street (given their very large street-facing windows), and the gallery and its digital spaces. In addition, new funding from the City of Sault Ste. Marie enabled the organization to increase capacity so they could pay artist fees and run a small screening program. Unfortunately, however, the pandemic constrained 180 Projects' ability to develop the projects they'd planned and prevented the artists from benefiting from the funding. Through their *StreetView* project, for example, it seemed possible to curate media art and host artist exchanges, but these physical exchanges became impossible given the pandemic's duration and the mandated distancing restrictions. Yet, while the pandemic did foster some of its other digital options and collaborations, in early 2020 (when the pandemic started), 180 Projects wasn't ready to move cleanly into digital forms. However, a slow digital pivot leading to a deeper online presence may enable the organization's continuation.

> We've delayed that all year; we haven't realized any of that project. In hindsight, it would have been nicer to pivot to some other online platform or online programming. So, I'm partly thinking through, what kind of online space do we need to develop right now? —Andrea Pinheiro

After our interview in December 2020, the gallery reopened and mounted a few physical exhibitions. They increasingly adopted digital platforms—particularly Instagram—to profile the artists and their work

and to stream artist talks; they used their website to archive recordings. These latter activities have expanded the reach of the artists' work, demonstrated the impact of gallery-based exhibitions, and increased gallery "visits."

> We would still like to do our *StreetView* projections, but then have that screening series available online too. But ideally, have it embedded within an upgraded website. I'm sure [it'd be easier] to go ahead and make it happen and have it hosted on Vimeo if we have to, but I'm thinking through what is the viewer experience? How is it different than just stumbling on a series of videos in Vimeo or searching out artists for installations? I've seen some exhibitions where there are 3D tours. But those aren't as interesting to me as when there have been events hosted within installations, where people are activating the space or the piece in some sort of way. The live openings are maybe kind of interesting, but I think the possibilities for using these platforms, and thinking through it in completely different ways is so interesting. —Andrea Pinheiro

Andrea and others who curate and encourage art, like Alexander Rondeau (see the Between Pheasants Contemporary case study here), demonstrate that becoming equipped digitally and generating a digital presence requires careful thought. Organizations need to be able to plan and consider their capacity and intention; they need to be aware that moving into a virtual curation through digital platforms may require certain types of knowledge or have unfamiliar elements and intensities that aren't present when working with analogue forms. A digital presence is not simply about posting images on a social media account or doing a live opening.

> I know a lot of the galleries that I've talked to in Vancouver have said they've had more people in to see exhibitions, more than almost ever because of the appointments. It was also interesting even just having students participate in Art Toronto. It wasn't a very visually enjoyable experience looking at the artwork, but the talks they found valuable. The other thing is being rural, we're kind of limited. So, in terms of the internet usage, I'm having to run multiple internet hubs just to cover all my Zoom meetings and classes. After you've done all that, it's got to be a really good talk to go listen to. —Andrea Pinheiro

Capacity significantly influences the programming for 180 Projects. This includes what is needed for a strong digital presence in combination with their virtual collaborations. 180 Projects' capacity to curate, manage the platforms, and update its website has been limited. While there have been COVID response grants available during the pandemic, they don't have the capacity to apply. In addition, some of the grants aren't really applicable, or require too much time, for a small organization.

> All the Canada Council digital grants just seem too big in scope for what we could have taken on, and for what we need. [We need] just to be able to hire someone to build a website that has a lot more functionality, and server space, and that sort of thing. Yeah, we just didn't need these $30,000 grants for that. —Andrea Pinheiro

Institutional partnerships, and the divisions of labour that curation, exhibition planning, and promotion (digital and analogue) require are not always clear or divided equally. This is often related to governance or structural differences. Andrea, for example, navigates the complexities of the inter-institutional relationships between the gallery and Algoma University and has several roles in this relationship: she is the founder and co-owner of the gallery space, an artist-run centre with a Board of Directors; she is also, separately but equally importantly, the Director of 180 Projects. She steers 180 Projects' vision and capacity, but also tries to balance the needs of the Fine Arts Department and its relations

to the university with the range of structural and governance-related requirements that emerge as a result of the partnerships.

While most universities, particularly those with fine arts departments, have campus-based galleries to profile the work of students and visiting artists, Algoma University has never had a gallery or exhibition space. Andrea and 180 Projects coordinate and adopt the same exhibition role that is typical of fine arts departments. While Andrea, as co-founder and owner of the gallery space, has donated the gallery space to facilitate student connections to the art communities in the region, there has been no financial support from the university.

> A big part of the continuation or the maintenance of 180 Projects for me was that the university needed it as well. There's no exhibition space for the students at the school. So that's also partly problematic in terms of getting funding or doing different projects, because there's always, you know, those needs of the university that we're trying to meet. And that's all a donation to the university too. So, it's not just this problem of how do we make having a space economically feasible. —Andrea Pinheiro

Similar to other contemporary artist-run spaces in the region, such as Galerie du Nouvel-Ontario, White Water Gallery, and New Adventures in Sound Art, 180 Projects' viability is dependent on public funding. Eligibility for operating funding requires that organizations have incorporated non-profit status. Some organizations, while it is not technically required, have staff members who are hired either part-time or full-time. Given that the OAC, for instance, will generally grant between ten and fifteen percent of the operating budget if an organization is successful in its request, it makes sense for applicants to have a significant operating budget. This can be a major, if not impossible, scaling challenge for small ad hoc and volunteer artist run centres, despite their long-term impact and importance. As a very small ad hoc collective, 180 Projects is ineligible for operating funding from

the OAC and the Canada Council for the Arts (CCA). Unlike other organizations that have met these criteria and have accessed operating funding, 180 Projects is unable to do so. Essentially, they are caught in the gap that results from funders not acknowledging the value of small, ad hoc organizations and investing in them; this negatively affects the vitality, visibility, and viability of the arts sector in the region.

> I imagined that we would sort of transition to more of a not-for-profit status much sooner. I saw it as the process of getting this organization starting to go, and then needing others to step in to take on the work. But there's just not that many people around right now here that have worked in not-for-profits, or if they have, they're already maxed out volunteering for other organizations. —Andrea Pinheiro

Since its inception, Andrea has helped finance 180 Projects' gallery space and been the backbone of the organization, and this commitment is similar to that of others in the region. 180 Projects' private/collective status adds a complex dynamic to the relationship between the gallery and funding agencies; privately-owned galleries are not eligible for public arts funding. Conversely, if Andrea were to receive income from 180 Projects through grants, it could be seen as a conflict of interest, given her ownership of the building. There are complex governance and ownership issues to consider. While incorporation can be relatively simple (groups can adapt the existing incorporation papers of other organizations compliant with the Not-for-profit Corporations Act, the $200 fee makes it relatively inexpensive to incorporate, and non-profit status allows for incorporated collectives), ad hoc groups find themselves struggling with questions about structure, capacity, and long-term compliance questions. For over-strapped organizations, having access to advisors, mentors, and others who can help navigate these questions and the process of incorporation can be pivotal.

180 Projects relies on project grant funding. While this funding can include some expenses that fall into operating fund categories, such as property tax, insurance, utilities, and salaries (and are pro-rated for project duration), the ability to include them are more commonly applied to larger projects with CCA funding than projects allocated $5,000 to $15,000 by the OAC. As Andrea notes, when reflecting on the funding applications that she submitted to the OAC, "The proposals I had been putting in, the feedback I got from the OAC was always that they were too operational and not project based."

The gallery plays a critical role in terms of exhibiting student work and providing a lively space for artist talks and workshops. There is no commercial or in-kind agreement with the university, and, as mentioned, 180 Projects provides exhibition space and visibility to the university as a donation. Outside of funding, donations, or institutional support, there are few alternate sources of funding available for 180 Projects or other ad hoc organizations. It is also difficult to monetize—and sell on commission the contemporary work that 180 Projects typically exhibits, such as installation, performance, digital media, and other works that push boundaries. When there has been work available to sell to support artists and provide some income to the gallery, 180 Projects has had limited capacity to manage sales and keep the gallery open during regular hours.

It's something that we've talked about [selling work for artists through online platforms], but again, as an organization, [we] have been really hesitant to take [it] on because of all the responsibilities that come with trying to sell work or memberships. You really need to have the regular staff to be doing that responsibly.

Definitely, shared administrative support would be huge. Shared positions. That was one of the things that we were working on

with Thinking Rock,[3] applying for an NOHFC position that would be shared between the two organizations. So, a person would start with Thinking Rock, gain insight into the processes that they've already developed, because we have no policies and procedures set up, and then they could come in with that training. Definitely it's about the positions more than anything. And other ways to incentivize volunteers. Everybody who is trying to get their art career going or is willing or interested in working with our board, they are very active with lots of other things or have lots of other things going on that makes volunteer work unsustainable. So, I think being able to provide something for the volunteers would be helpful. But if all the board members are getting first dibs at having exhibitions, that affects the programming in a really strong and problematic way. Even if we had the capacity to give honorariums or some sort of stipend, with the amount of work that needs to be done, I think that it just seems like it could make it much more sustainable.—Andrea Pinheiro

Twenty years ago, Northern Ontario had a very different art scene. Media-based, installation, performance, or sound art was rarely created and disseminated. Rebecca Belmore, arguably one of the most influential artists to come from the region and one of Canada's most prominent and important artists, left Northwestern Ontario to study and practice elsewhere. She's since created work as an artist-in-residence hosted by Galerie du Nouvel-Ontario in Sudbury, which points to the importance of small, contemporary artist-run centres in Northern Ontario. In a region that has relatively high numbers of artists[4] and low income,[5] it is especially important that ad hoc organizations can develop

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3   Thinking Rock Community Arts is a non-profit community arts organization based in Thessalon.
4   See Hills Research Strategies Report: https://hillstrategies.com/wp-content/uploads/1970/01/Artists_by_region_in_Ontario.pdf.
5   Artists in the region earn significantly less money than others in the labour force; for instance, artists in Greater Sudbury earned an average of $20,100, a 36% wage gap, and artist income in Sault Ste. Marie averaged $10,300, a 64% wage gap. While Sudbury and district is

capacity in a sustained way and be able to activate and engage in critical conversations within the region.

180 Projects and other artist-run centres, if supported in their goals to curate contemporary, experimental, and under-represented work by Northern Ontario artists, could also successfully launch a decentralized network of hybrid digital-analogue spaces to establish visibility for the artists, their work, and the media art ecosystem in Northern Ontario.

What this conversation suggests:

- Hybrid artistic and organizational practices that activate both analogue/on-the-ground and digital/virtual spaces enable new and possibly fruitful collaborations that might increase administrative and creative capacity for organizing, creation, presentation, and dissemination of art in the region.
- Collaborations that are responsive to regional and community contexts and that have fluidity in terms of support and direction, may be more fruitful than formal organizations.
- Across the region, we have seen that there are key individuals who influence the development of the arts sector. Their relationships to other curators and artists across the region, the country, and internationally are influential to the kinds of relationships other local artists make, and the kinds of work being created.
- Andrea has some financial leeway; this has allowed her to provide a free gallery space for 180 Projects and Algoma University, given her full time position at the university. However, like other leaders and volunteers, organizational capacity is extremely limited; as a volunteer, she must balance

out her professional obligations at the university. 180 Projects' recent decision, somewhat compelled by the pandemic, to explore digital platforms, virtual collaborations and other hybrid activations more broadly, has been constrained due to limited funding options and significant human resource gaps.

- Funders need to recognize the valuable role of ad hoc collectives and volunteer-run groups; funders and Arts Service Organizations might explore how to support collectives in the region with greater capacity, higher resources, and support (advise, mentorship, guidance) to navigate structural, governance, incorporation, and granting processes.
- City level granting has been crucial for 180 Projects; the more capacity an organization has, the more it contributes to its local community. Across the North, however, only the urban centres provide consistent arts funding to organizations (a few cities, such as Sault Ste. Marie, have recently expanded granting to individuals). Rural townships and township networks, economic development offices, and community futures organizations need to invest in artist-run centres, collectives, organizations, artists, and artistic leadership through micro-grants, loans, seed funding, training programs, resource sharing, and donation structures. Critical infrastructure—reliable broadband and access to low-cost spaces—are also necessary.
- Ad hoc collectives, particularly those without the challenge of a physical space, are flexible, nimble, and responsive to the community and emerging disciplinary and interdisciplinary practices and conversations. They are connected to the people, conversations, and arts circuits, rather than to formal spaces. Support for these groups to maintain this kind of flexibility and responsiveness, within both an ad hoc structure and incorporated governance model, is needed.

more populous, it also has more organizations of support and a more robust arts ecosystem, which may account for some of the disparity between artist incomes. Hills Research Strategy Report (this report is dated, 2006, and more current research on the status of artists in the region is needed.)

FORMAL TRAINING:
EDUCATION
ECOSYSTEMS

All Over Towne, on set student film production, photo credit, Weengushk Film Institute

FORMAL TRAINING:
EDUCATION ECOSYSTEMS

Not everyone can access post-secondary or advanced studies, nor is that model necessarily desirable for all artists, curators, and arts administrators. The expense, geographical distances, and institutional barriers related to attending college or university in the region or province make both undergraduate and graduate studies inaccessible for many northerners.

Alexander Rondeau, who moved to Toronto to focus on northern queer ruralities as part of his studies, notes the irony of his research focus given he had to make the move south to pursue his Master of Fine Arts degree. He was able to present his graduate exhibition in the North only because of COVID. Education and access to critical studies, fine art training, and other arts-related programs has been mentioned as a barrier throughout the research conversations.

High-school fine arts programs have a variable influence on students. Generally, artists identified individual teachers who influenced them or described particular aspects of the classes that helped them to see themselves as artists and later pursue their art. Almost invariably, the artists had some pivotal experience: an excellent teacher; access to the Digital Creator program (which provided equipment and technical and creative support to youth[1]); participation in an arts event or exhibition; and access to a mentor, peer, curator, or artist who helped them to perceive arts as possible, relevant, and meaningful.

Many organizations and artists work in the schools, particularly through the Ontario Arts Council Artist-in-Residence Education (AIRe)

program, and also through project grants in the Artist in Community and Schools programs. Nadene Thériault-Copeland, the Executive Director of New Adventures in Sound Art (NAISA, South River), spoke about a primary school program that they ran:

> I have first-hand experience because I've been involved in a lot of the educational initiatives that we've put together that were specific to youth. One year we did grade four and five students in one of the French schools. We had a portable Sound Bash that we put together that fit into these gun cases, if you can believe it, because we have all of the microphone stands in gun cases. And we were hanging all these crazy pots and whatever, and everything was miked. We would start the day by playing them a piece, a soundscape piece, or an electroacoustic piece. And we asked them what their opinion of it was, "What do you think? What do you think the artist is trying to do?" And in the beginning, they said, "It's just a bunch of noise, it's this, it's that" but there was no understanding of it at all. Then we had two or three sessions, with each half of the group, where they did a sounding walk or sounding out the environment, where we were teaching them how to point out sounds around them. And then we gave them the opportunity to create a narrative. And then in whatever way they decided they were going to do it, tell that story through the Sound Bash things that were in front of them. We had also, in the beginning, done a little improvisation as well, just on the sound, so they knew what each thing did. On the second day, all the students performed for each other, their narratives. And at the end, we played another piece. And we said, "Okay, what do you think the artist is trying to do here?" and they all had completely different responses, they were totally "Oh, they're trying to tell this story about, you know, this, this thing that's happening," and it was much more, it became much more informed, it became an experience that happened. The listening side of it became about having an understanding

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[1] The Digital Creator North program, a program of the Near North Mobile Media Lab, is housed at satellite project stations in six communities in Northern Ontario. See https://www.n2m2l.ca/digital-creator/.

of what the artist was trying to do rather than this foreign object that they didn't really have any interest in. We did sound walks before a concert in Toronto and with every radio art festival we would have a transmission workshop where they created little transmitters. And that informed their understanding of what some of the artists were trying to do when they were performing. —Nadene Thériault-Copeland, *Executive Director, New Adventures in Sound Art, South River*

In this way, NAISA and other artists help build the conversation about contemporary media arts work in local communities while simultaneously building a more robust educational experience for students. These activities, over time, contribute to a more robust media arts ecosystem in the region. Artists discussed their seminal media arts experiences at school, but they also talked about the potential for intergenerational learning because of the skills held by young people:

> I've already had a co-op kid that is a perfect example. This kid had his own 3D printer at home; knew more about 3D printing than I did, he kind of taught me certain things. On the other side I taught him stuff like working in the community and 3D modelling. So, there's these hidden little gems out there. —David Laronde, *musician, Teme-Augama Anishnabai/Temagami*

Individual teachers have expertise, mentorship, liaison, and program guidance roles. They can profoundly affect students and the arts community at large by introducing students to various types of arts knowledge and experiences. The loss of a particularly motivated teacher can often mean the end of an arts program and engaged school-community circuits. Currently, there are three schools of post-secondary education in Northern Ontario (Nipissing University, Laurentian University, and Lakehead University). There could be opportunities for

schools, curators, artists, and galleries to build greater knowledge and outreach about the media arts sector in Northern Ontario, including contemporary media arts practices and artists, so that future graduates bring this knowledge with them into their primary and secondary school courses.

At the post-secondary level, critical, contemporary approaches influence the kind of arts practices that happen. (For case studies on 180 Projects and Between Pheasants Contemporary, see here and here.) There are only three fine arts programs (and the Algoma University Fine Arts program is struggling) in Northern Ontario; similar to post-secondary studies, access is a challenge, given costs, distance and other access issues. Fine arts programs are typically underfunded or require depths of interaction with other organizations and institutions outside of a post-secondary setting to bolster student opportunities. This is not established within the region. In addition, while there are fine arts programs at other universities in the province, or nationally, it is highly competitive. There are costs associated with moving south and support systems are inadequate in terms of students being able to access integral elements of their communities or culture. The migration of students to southern institutions for lack of further education opportunities or training in the region does not help the northern-based arts sector develop. There are a variety of reasons that some students may choose to attend art schools in urban spaces, such as a larger demographic, specific research clusters, and greater representation of certain kinds of diversity or identities. Some students, however, have experienced institutional racism and a lack of representation in urban spaces and schools. Alex S., a graduate of the Weengushk Film Institute, said,

> It was incredibly hard at Humber [College] to do something that wasn't your typical Second City sketch or your typical club comedy. And both of those things are incredibly white. I am part Indigenous, my dad is white and my mom is Haudonosaunee, so to be the only Indigenous person in a 60–80 person program

and you're white passing, you're basically going to tamp it down a bit and tell people to go fuck themselves when they ask you questions that are racist.
—Alex S., *Weengushk Film Institute graduate*

Some Weengushk students said that it was difficult to figure out the admissions process for some schools. Some found it frustrating to know that they had all the right documentation to apply for admission only to realize later that they had missed a piece of the application. At Weengushk, students benefit from a very simple application process (one-form submission) and staff offer assistance with funding applications. Seemingly simple administrative processes can be barriers to students. For a strong, diverse media arts ecosystem that reflects the communities of the region, barriers that affect access to education and relevant programming need to be addressed. This includes schedules, such as how and when programs are offered. Communities and students can be better self-directed and control their narratives (tell their stories) when programs are culturally relevant, have flexibility, and include support for marginalized and Indigenous students. Alex S. points out possibilities, using the Weengushk model: "Why are there not 95 Weengushks across Canada to decentralize learning?"

The variable broadband speeds in Northern Ontario means that digital access is not equal. Some artists, interested in school programs, have said that financial and time investments can be prohibitive, and it can be difficult to find information about what programs for study are available for online learning.

> I know there are lots of our upper year students and senior students and a lot of people who are looking for things like remote or limited residency master's programs. So, there's a desire for access to master's programs to be able to continue studying while also getting to live in this region.
> —Andrea Pinheiro, *Chair, Fine Arts Department, Algoma University*

A participant in the Temiskaming Shores circles also spoke to the importance of post-secondary and graduate programs, noting their influence on local arts creation:

> The idea of having post-secondary education in a community is very much known to be…if you have a university for performing arts, you're going to have theatres develop around there, like that sort of the whole thing works for most of us.
> —Anonymous

This holds true for the urban communities in the region. Where there are film schools at the colleges or fine arts programs with courses and studios supporting media arts, we see graduates becoming involved in, and further supporting, the development of local media arts infrastructure.

Critical curatorial practices develop where there are practicing artists and curators. As we've seen throughout this research, these clusters develop where there are contemporary approaches in college and university art programs, galleries, and communities. But there are few opportunities for formal training and few opportunities for conversations about current and developing critical art practices. Artist talks, typically events that are highly local (pre-pandemic), are inaccessible to artists in communities spread across the region. Other events such as symposia, colloquia, and other gatherings with a focus on contemporary and critical art practices are rare. As digital platforms and the use of them increase, artists can connect online to hear artist talks, enroll in workshops and programs, and build relationships with other artists across the region and globally. (For more about hybrid space, see here.) An on-site program is still important, however, and, and in the conversation circles, the obstacles to access were a consistent discussion.

Research by the Northern Ontario Research Development and Knowledge (NORDIK) Institute demonstrates that there is a gap in formal education opportunities in the region[2]:

> There is an increasing number of people interested in producing higher quality products and services but limited educational opportunities for artistic, technical, and business development also limits this expansion (Ortiz, 2017, 175–196; Ortiz and Broad, 2007, 42–44). The primary source for advancement is through peer mentoring within the sector (Ortiz, 2017, 175–196). Current business development programs and/or incentives are not tailored to the arts, resulting in less uptake within the artistic community (Ortiz, 2017, 224–238; Ortiz and Broad, 2007, 64–68).
>
> It is important that students/graduates have job skills applicable to the workplace and post-secondary institutions could explore the opportunity of developing a short program that will better prepare students/graduates for the job market. Examples are Microsoft Office applications, business skills training and development, cultural competency, time management, and budget management. There is also a greater need for employers to provide mentorship and cooperative placements within the community.[3]

When asked about the issues that media artists in the region face, Nadene Thériault-Copeland observed:

Access to technology, access, really, to workshops, we find is the number one issue. We try to provide as much as we can, but even for them to get to a workshop….You know, unless we're doing it virtually, which Darren has done with some people from Thunder Bay, and we want to continue to do that kind of thing, but access either by distance or by just having people they can go to, to take workshops. Even in Toronto, there aren't a lot of universities, even in colleges, offering you [media] workshops to the general public. — Nadene Thériault-Copeland

NAISA's experience, having been based in Toronto until moving to South River, demonstrates the relevance and importance of artist-driven workshops and training in the region. (For more about NAISA and informal mentorship and training, see [here](#) and [here](#).) There are few programs that offer one-off workshops or courses for the general public and informal mentorship. Workshops and other community-based activities are important for the professional development of artists in the region. This community-driven approach allows for flexibility and is responsive to artist needs and constraints; currently, there is a lack of available, or consistent, programs for a broad range of needs and interests in the arts sector.

As we learned from the Weengushk students, many artists want to stay in the North or close to home communities. Some note that the expense of pursuing formal training elsewhere is prohibitive. Others recognize that it might not be possible to stay in their home communities if they chose to pursue a full-time career in the film industry, but they also weren't sure how to approach finding a job after graduation. They expressed an interest in the financial realities of the film industry and the business side of an arts practice; they found that art training schools glossed over the realities of succeeding in a sustainable career as artists, particularly in rural Northern Ontario.

2   See also Jude Ortiz, *Culture, creativity and the arts: Building resilience in Northern Ontario*, PhD thesis, University of the West of England, 2017.

3   Jude Ortiz and Gayle Broad, *Culture, Creativity and the Arts, Achieving Community Resilience and Sustainability Though the Arts in Sault Ste. Marie* (Sault Ste. Marie: NORDIK Institute, 2007), https://nordikinstitute.com/research/culture-creativity-and-the-arts-achieving-community-resilience-and-sustainability-through-the-arts-in-sault-ste-marie/.

I'm interested in developing animation skills, so I did some research, but it's a two-to-three-year program, not here, and very expensive. —Anonymous

The only reason I'm at [Weengushk Film Institute] is because we have a scholarship that pays for the entire thing.
—Bridget D., *Weengushk Film Institute graduate*

There is recognition that the universities and colleges could provide more of an outreach role for short programs or micro-courses, with credentials, for artists and students to learn particular skills, retrain, or to supplement a career path with resources and learning through mentorship or instruction. This might ease financial pressures that students and artists face as the programs could be offered at a scale that has more flexibility but retains relevance.

Robert Peace, from Rolling Pictures in Sault Ste. Marie, described a potential collaborative film training program with Sault College that consisted of "micro-credential courses."

Rolling Pictures was asked by Mr. [Ross] Romano [Sault Ste. Marie MPP, former Ministry of Colleges and Universities] a number of months ago, and then by Sault College, to participate in creating micro-credential courses in the area of post-production, etc. The twelve-week micro-credentials were to be more geared to retraining people for some of the niche jobs in the industry: I.T. positions, translation, all kinds of different things. One of our owners, Mike Forsy, came up with about 20 different careers within the industry that aren't the typical ones that most people even think about or even learn about at the college. So, we were going to be working with the college to develop the content of those courses and then they will be delivering them. We would then be working to train the people in the real world sort of thing in those areas. Unfortunately,

it was clarified by the province that while there was funding to develop a course, it was limited for each college and more importantly we were advised that there were no additional funds to actually teach the courses, so the whole thing came to a halt.
—Robert Peace, *Director, Community and Government Relations, Rolling Pictures, Sault Ste. Marie*

Adrian Vilaca, the founder of Borderline Radio in Sault Ste. Marie, is a veteran of music promotion, but was very new to the world of podcasting. (For a case study of Borderline Radio, see here.) He spent most of COVID learning the technology and how to podcast through hands-on immersion as he established the station. He feels that he would have benefitted from a course, and notes that it would be helpful for students and relatively simple to create.

I think there's a course at a university for this very easily. I really do. I think you could probably teach a podcasting course at Sault College here, probably welcome it. If I wanted to go and create it, and say, "Okay, we're in this world these days, and people want to do it. And here's the curriculum, this is how you do it. Here's the deal." Would I have benefited from that? Without a doubt. How to interview, how to be interviewed. The editing. —Adrian Vilaca, *Borderline Radio, Sault Ste. Marie*

Jennifer Mathewson, a freelance filmmaker and the former Film, Television, and Digital Media Coordinator for the City of Sault Ste. Marie, pointed out that companies could use the funding provided by the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation (NOHFC) for mentorships to bolster training and hire locally. This would forge a link between college courses and hands-on training. It would also make financial sense, as the company would not have to spend money transporting crew from Southern Ontario.

Producers are required by the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation, as part of their investment, to provide mentorship training. They also receive bonus points on their applications for hiring in key roles. I always try to encourage productions to take on interns from the Sault College film program or through a local employment agency. We encourage paid positions but understand that in some cases that is not always possible. We want to encourage productions to collaborate with these institutions and hope that the experience will provide a valuable opportunity for someone to learn a new skill or trade. One of the things I did after our last discussion [one of the MANO circles] was initiating conversations with producers. I spoke via the phone with a producer in Toronto and asked him to break down his schedule, his crew needs, and all the entry level positions that you could potentially be bringing on a student or unemployed individual for. He provided me with a list of positions such as grip, electrics, account assistants, and office PA. He provided an estimated budget of how much money he would save by hiring a local for the role instead of contracting someone from Southern Ontario. This producer would save over $30,000 just on hotels and per diem fees for six positions. So that generated a bunch of discussions with him and other producers. We need to get more of these students into paid positions so that we can actually train them on set, and even do advanced training. I think it's really unique that Sault Ste. Marie has that partnership with the Sault College film program, that we're putting people onto these sets. But for anybody else, a non-student looking to be active in the industry, they don't know how they can become a part of the film industry, how to break into it. So, bridging that gap is another step we need to look into.

—Jennifer Mathewson, *filmmaker and Film, Television, and Digital Media Coordinator, City of Sault Ste. Marie*

While students were excited about filmmaking, many of them expressed interest in other artistic mediums like visual art, make-up art, music, and animation. Many explained that their interest in filmmaking stemmed from an initial interest in one of these other mediums. Students either weren't sure how to access training locally in these different specific areas or had previously sought out training in a more urban setting and found it not to be the right fit—they found courses were either disconnected from their cultural background or overly academic. Sometimes, they did not want to live in the city where the course was offered.

> Because of my health, I actually left Toronto and decided that I couldn't live the city life because I wanted to heal. I'm from Northern Ontario, around Elliot Lake. I want to stay in the North. I wanted to get into film because I've always been interested. The beauty of Weengushk [Film Institute] is that it's in the North, it's home…well it's close to home, and I still have that support from my community and my own culture which is beautiful.
> —Angela Lewis (Kijadjiwan), *Weengushk Film Institute graduate, Serpent River First Nation/M'Chigeeng First Nation*

Historically, students at Weengushk have had a variety of learning disabilities and mental health issues requiring significant amounts of dedication, time, and other support from staff. Staff are often not adequately trained in supporting students with mental health experiences; this leads to challenges for staff and students alike. Students expressed concern about the difficulties they had experienced in accessing quality mental health care through educational institutions and stressed that it is one of the most critical things for helping to improve their quality of life. While mental health issues and adequate supports might seem a peripheral challenge in terms of media arts infrastructure in the region, it is central to the environment that makes it possible for students and emerging filmmakers to tell their stories, build a career in

the sector within their own communities and region, and therefore have a greater degree of control over the kinds of stories told, and the facets of how, where, and by whom. (For more on safe and accessible spaces, see [here](#).)

Many people have spoken about the learning curve required when there are insufficient resources, difficulties and frustrations in finding the right programs/tutorials in-person and online, and the benefits of a friend/colleague who can informally mentor or teach. Most artists are self-taught—a small number in the North are formally trained. Artists in the region are positioned to engage with some form of hybrid approach to training, performance/presenting, and disseminating their work. This means that access to curated platforms and equipment as well as software and training will need to be culturally and contextually relevant and also designed and delivered in the region. This could include workshops, tutorials, and other professional development opportunities to help them learn a range of media arts skills—artistic, technical, and curatorial—as well as the financial and practical aspects of the business of art.

What these conversations suggest

Diversity of training from the North: The conversations with artists point to the need for a range of northern-based educational and creative opportunities for young, emerging, and professional artists and curators. These would be informal and include digital, hybrid, and on-site options, and provide links to networks, including additional educational offerings, educational and artistic mentorship, and exhibition/curatorial opportunities. These components would support a critical/contemporary, diverse media arts ecosystem; it would be controlled and accessed from the North. A decentralized range of educational opportunities would enable artists, curators, and arts administrators to learn from their home communities.

Curated conversations: There is need and interest for conversations about contemporary arts practices and for sustained critical practices in colleges and universities. Curators, gallerists, and educators in academic institutions might collaborate on colloquia, artist talks, and other curated events. Funding programs that can support these engagements include the Northern Arts program at the OAC and Creating, Knowing and Sharing at the CCA.

Arts Education at Schools of Education: We repeatedly learned about the impact of individual teachers on students and the arts community at large and how the loss of a particularly motivated teacher could often mean the end of an arts program. These kinds of school-community circuits are common. There may be opportunities for curators, artists, and galleries to work with the three schools of education in Northern Ontario (Nipissing University, Laurentian University, and Lakehead University) to build greater knowledge about the media arts sector in the region, such as contemporary media arts practices and artists, so that graduates bring this knowledge and these connections with them into their teaching.

INFORMAL MENTORSHIP + TRAINING ECOSYSTEMS

Neil Debassige, *Fuel the Fire TV* (2022).

INFORMAL MENTORSHIP + TRAINING ECOSYSTEMS

I got to the point where I just pulled the trigger and said, "Okay, you know what, I'm signing the contract," not even really knowing what a Codec was. I just did not know, right? All of those specifications. And I didn't know how to edit. I Googled it, and they're like, Well, you know, what's user friendly is Final Cut Pro. And that's what a lot of shows were using at the time. When we shot our first season, a lot of it was on tape. So, bringing that over, digitalizing that, was just such a steep learning curve. I was able to rough it in and get to the 22 minutes. And then it was focusing on Weengushk [Film Institute] and having Nano because I knew him, saying, "Here's the spec papers, does this fit?" So, a very "ass backwards" kind of approach to figuring it all out. It just happened to work. But it was an incredible amount of time that I had to spend on the front end and the editing piece because I was literally editing for television and not knowing anything about it. I was learning it as I was editing it, you know, a month prior.
—Neil Debassige, *producer and founder, Fuel the Fire TV, M'Chigeeng First Nation, Manitoulin Island*

I have friends or colleagues that have had just little, tiny projects. They want to do a micro-short—three minutes—just to learn how to do it. And unless they're going to shoot it with their iPhone and edit it with iMovie, they can't do it. Because there's no real access to [experienced people] to say, "Hey, who can help us out who knows a little bit about sound or who has a boom mic we can use and knows how to use that." So that's a problem.
—Jimmie Chiverelli, *independent filmmaker, Sault Ste. Marie*

The more ways that that knowledge is shared, then the healthier the scene is.
—Darren Copeland, *Artistic Director, New Adventures in Sound Art, South River*

Having local capacity means that now it's our project. Now we own it. We own the work that's being done.
—Rémi Alie, *Art Fix of Nipissing*

Informal mentorship and training play an important role for artists and organizations at all stages of their development, given there are few formal professional development resources available in the region. Resources can be difficult to access, and expertise is often divided among a range of roles outside of one's training or interests. Artists recognize that it makes sense for experiences to be shared and modelled for emerging artists and to establish access to mentors whose diversity is inspiring and builds confidence and capacity. But there are obstacles for mentors, including the fact that they are often already multiply engaged in a variety of projects or tasks. While there are formalized funding structures for mentorship and training,[1] some of them have requirements that act as a barrier for individuals or organizations to move forward (for instance, the internship program at the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation/NOHFC). Ultimately, informal and formal mentoring and training are practices that could help underpin and bolster the media arts sector in Northern Ontario, possibly through a decentralized model that makes use of clusters and networks that are already present and that enables funding for differing roles, contexts, and realities within the media arts sector.

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1   For instance, the Ontario Arts Council's Northern Arts program funds professional development activities and the Artists in Communities and Schools program offers a mentee supplement; the Canada Council for the Arts has a targeted professional development program, supporting up to $10,000 projects; the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation has a mentorship program targeted for the film sector and an internship program (available to all sectors).

Research by the Northern Ontario Research Development Ideas and Knowledge (NORDIK) Institute[2] in Sault Ste. Marie documented both the limited opportunities for training and mentorship in Northern Ontario's cultural sector and the prevalence of peer mentoring[3]:

> There is an increasing number of people interested in producing higher quality products and services but limited educational opportunities for artistic, technical, and business development also limits this expansion (Ortiz, 2017, 175–196; Ortiz and Broad, 2007, 42–44). The primary source for advancement is through peer mentoring within the sector (Ortiz, 2017, 175–196). Current business development programs and/or incentives are not tailored to the arts, resulting in less uptake within the artistic community. (Ortiz, 2017, 224–238; Ortiz and Broad, 2007, 64–68).

After Jonathan Zagula moved from Mississauga to Manitoulin Island, he realized that his university degree did not prepare him to actually work in the film industry. To supplement his film degree from Brock University, Jonny attended Weengushk Film Institute (WFI) which, he noted, was much more hands-on. After graduating, he started freelancing and working at WFI. His learning on the job was mostly trial-by-fire, and he acknowledged that "Mentorship probably would've made it less stressful." He explained that, like many young professionals starting out, targeted mentorship for young media artists around Manitoulin Island would have been extremely helpful, specifically to learn the more practical elements of developing a successful career in a rural environment. He emphasized that working in Northern Ontario comes with different needs and parameters than if one was to work in the film industry or the arts in Southern Ontario. Mentorship and training that is relevant to those parameters is crucial to help northern artists on their career paths. While mentorship is typically designed for emerging (or young) artists, artists value mentorship and training during all stages of their careers, and for a variety of reasons, such as whether to navigate a disciplinary shift, to adapt to changing environments (such as with the pandemic), or to deepen their current practice.

> I did a mentorship [at Harbourfront Centre] where I started as an administrative intern and then I worked my way up to production and programming.
> —Angela Lewis (Kijadjiwan), *former student, Weengushk Film Institute, M'Chigeeng First Nation/Serpent River First Nation*

Angela, a student at WFI at Manitoulin Island, spoke about the value of a mentorship circle in the Indigenous Arts Administrator program that she attended in Southern Ontario; the circle was designed with mentors at the Harbourfront Centre and the Woodland Cultural Centre. She spoke of the impact that this long-term mentorship had on her work and how it influenced her choice to formally study film. Tracie Louttit, a producer and camera operator from Garden River First Nation, was influenced early in her career by a training and mentorship program in Ottawa. It was a similar format to the program Angela participated in twenty years later in Toronto, and which influenced both of their pathways into film.

> I began my post-secondary education in Ottawa in 1990 and started with Business Administration then moved into Photography. An opportunity crossed my path in the fall of 1998 right after I graduated from Algonquin College and immediately it piqued my interest, so I applied. It was a training and mentorship opportunity for Urban Indigenous Youth

2   Jude Ortiz and Gayle Broad, *Culture, Creativity and the Arts, Achieving Community Resilience and Sustainability Though the Arts in Sault Ste. Marie* (Sault Ste. Marie: NORDIK Institute, 2007), https://nordikinstitute.com/research/culture-creativity-and-the-arts-achieving-community-resilience-and-sustainability-through-the-arts-in-sault-ste-marie/.

3   To read more about the importance and possibilities of peer networking in the region, see the report published by NORDIK: https://nordikinstitute.com/development/sustaining-arts-organizations-through-peer-networking/.

who were interested in learning all the facets of documentary filmmaking over the course of eight months. I was elated when I was accepted, and this is when I became involved in the film industry. We learned all of the facets of documentary filmmaking through workshops, we also took part in cultural activities, and received other relevant skills and training from Indigenous professionals in the film and arts industry, like Tantoo Cardinal, the late Richard Wagamese, and Gail Maurice, among many other wonderful people. Because I had a background with still cameras, I was really interested in becoming a cinematographer and to this day, I still love working with the camera. Producing was not my first choice, but over the years of receiving a lot of mentoring from other producers, it became something that I really started to enjoy and so I'm very grateful to have that foundation and experience to carry me forward.
—Tracie Louttit, *film producer and director, Garden River*
   First Nation

Tracie also spoke about a long-time, intensive training program for youth, offered by the American Indian Film Institute:

The American Indian Film Institute had a long-time Tribal Training mentorship program that they had offered to Indigenous youth of all ages. They would travel to different communities and provide ten-day film bootcamps, delivered by filmmakers from across the US and Canada. The bootcamps culminated with a community film festival, so the youth could share their work with their families and relations. That program was the vision of the late Michael Smith, founder of the AIFI, and had a huge impact on the communities and more so, many of those youth went on to further their training in film. It was a brilliant idea to introduce youth to all aspects of filmmaking.
—Tracie Louttit

The mentorship component built into the training at WFI is unique; students receive training and mentorship as part of their learning and Elders and guides contribute with significant land-based courses. However, these integrated mentorship opportunities are rare for graduates and artists within the wider community. It is challenging to find ongoing opportunities for formal and informal training and mentorship. While there may be some resources available on Manitoulin Island, such as theatre space and recording equipment at Debajehmujig Storytellers in Manitowaning, those aren't necessarily helpful to artists who are at the beginning stages of learning and unfamiliar with the equipment. On Manitoulin Island, there is great interest among Manitoulin art circles for additional mentorship, collective resource sharing, and access to other media arts support (see more in the Equipment section here).

The available funding programs (CCA, OAC, and NOHFC) are highly competitive, and do not offer long-term mentorship. Transition into the industry from either mentorship programs or from formal learning programs isn't an automatic fit: what is available, or the roles that a person has to fill, may not match the training or the interests of graduates.

In my earlier years as a camera operator/editor, I worked alongside many wonderful mentors and indie producers who produced community-based videos. I also had opportunities to mentor as a producer mentee in television during that time. I do remember one pivotal point for me. I was hired to shoot a community event and usually budgets were smaller and so I became my own assistant, setting up the camera gear, lights, transferring the footage to hard drives, and then even in some cases editing the footage. I overheard someone asking the producer if I knew what I was doing and if I was capable of doing my job. Back then, it was rare to see women who were techs, and more so, Indigenous women. I could've quit

right then and there, which was my first instinct because I felt angry and offended that someone would question my abilities. But later, as I thought about it more and more, that comment actually fuelled me to continue to move forward and onward. I'm so happy that I did! My advice is this: Do everything that you can to get experience in all departments before committing to one department and then choose which role or department makes your heart sing, makes you excited thinking about it and talking about it—that is your passion and passion in this field is what it's all about! —Tracie Louttit

Filmmaker Lieann Koivukoski, of Post Production North, has observed that a challenge of formal mentorship is that there is often a missed opportunity for the student/mentee and mentor to talk about roles and expectations. Orienting students and others about the realities of a film production prior to arriving on-site would be useful; she believes mentors could prepare the individual for mentorship before they begin their role in order to clarify expectations for both mentor and mentee. Allowing the individual to have prior access to the mentor and the benefit of that person's experiences and understanding of the role would help build a relationship before the person is active in a position within the industry.

> They go to the training and then they get their first job. And it's not for everybody. It sounds really glamorous, but it's not. You know, I've watched a lot of students come through that process [and] their first day working as a PA or production assistant. At the end of the day, it's not because anybody's been fooled, or shaming them, but it's so intense and moves so fast, you have no time, that they're just exhausted by the end. I've had a couple of students come up to me, or not even students, just people have come up to me and said, "No, I cannot do this. This is too hard." It's not like an office environment where you can have a conversation in the hallway, you can have a coffee.

No, that's not happening. You have enough time to get a coffee, go to the bathroom, get back to your desk. That's it.

Well, I would think that it would be important that before they even show up here. The mentorship program should not start on the first day of shooting, which is what it might be. It should happen as soon as all of the key people that are going to be at the top of the mentorship program are there and established. They should be reaching out to the community to find their shadows, or the people that they're going to be mentoring. So they can actually get involved in an actual conversation about what the job is and what their responsibilities are, and what to expect.
—Lieann Koivukoski, *Post Production North, North Bay*

A robust portfolio and/or CV is a critical part of certain funding programs; the students at WFI found that even if they had the networking connections to be hired, without the portfolio they could not receive the funding toward employment. Arts council funding, for example, requires applicants to have had independent filmmaking experience, which is important to support a robust and professional media arts funding regime; however, there are gaps for students and emerging filmmakers attempting to make the transition. This is made more difficult given the combined issues relating to equipment access, mentorship, training, and other supports, as well as systemic racism. Female and Indigenous students and filmmakers have noted the additional barriers they face, and how much harder it is for their stories to be produced.

> I don't work with million-dollar projects and prefer to work on smaller community projects with smaller budgets. But for those who wish to work on huge projects, having a long-term mentor who has the experience is key in moving forward and navigating the bigger mainstream industry. There definitely is an

imbalance and unfortunately, it doesn't quite lean in our favour.
—Tracie Louttit

Some students at WFI suggested it would be helpful to have some kind of database to link young people receiving training with opportunities and positions in the region. In addition, it could connect them with filmmakers, entrepreneurs, and established cultural workers who might be interested in hiring or mentoring them.

> They want us, but how do they get us?
> —Angela Lewis (Kijadjiwan), *Weengushk Film Institute graduate,*
> *Serpent River First Nation/M'Chigeeng First Nation*

WFI students mentioned that they had connected with people in their own communities, who, upon learning about the training they were receiving, expressed interest in hiring them onto certain projects. However, the organizations did not know how to access funding to employ a student or recent graduate, and often it was a personal connection who made them aware of employable graduates.

Zach Cassidy, an independent filmmaker in Timmins, described his own steep learning curve once he had left art school and began to work as a filmmaker; he had to adapt to the realities of the industry. He had to teach himself the business of filmmaking and how to find resources, including space; he noted that as a student he hadn't had to think too much about resources, as many had been made available to students by the institution.

> Sometimes it's interesting and painful to look back and see where I started. You just have to make it happen. If I can't do it on a commercial level, I won't be able to make it as an artist, because you have the same type of skills. It was a lot of self-teaching. What I took from school was the artistic side. I learned

very little about the business side of things. So that's a lot of where the self-teaching happened. Shifting gears from making short films in art school to making stuff that a paying customer was looking for. There were minimal industry-specific resources about how to get things up and running. I had the dream of starting a business that someday could be similar to what I had at the University of Guelph, which was a "media house" where you had all of the equipment, you had all of the workstations for post-production, and then you had skilled technicians that were there ready and able to answer your questions. I've always appreciated having that at Guelph, and actually in elementary and high school as well. I was so fortunate to have had a great teacher in my early years who introduced me to filmmaking. So, it was always like you need a space and support. And there are very few artistic spaces in Timmins. We need a space that encourages new artists to come and say, "Oh my goodness there are resources, I want to try this."
—Zach Cassidy, *filmmaker, Timmins* (For more about collective spaces and resource sharing <u>see here</u>.)

Josh Wood, the artistic director of the Timmins Symphony Orchestra, spoke about the pivot to live streaming performances during the pandemic. He discussed the intensity of learning new skills, and the critical necessity of guidance when there is a knowledge or experience gap and time is short.

> I didn't have a background. If you're a music student and you want to advance yourself, you've had to make recordings of yourself, for festivals and so on. You learn the basics, but nothing like this. There were a couple early workshops that were done that were important, crucial. Orchestras Canada (Donovan Seidel) put together the basics of Mosaic and he explained how to set this up in the early days of the pandemic. —Josh Wood, *Music Director and Conductor, Timmins Symphony Orchestra*

Lieann Koivukoski echoed Josh's comments, adding that the performance sector's digital pivot during the pandemic translated into an adaptive "learning how to do all this stuff" approach, but that there is also, within the industry, some resistance to asking others for help to access available resources. For example, she noted that there were colleagues in the sector who had already learned those skills, but they weren't asked to share their knowledge.

> There's been that huge chaos [as a result of the pandemic and the digital pivot] for the live performing sector, where they talk about their struggles and learning how to do all this stuff. And it's like, "Well, you don't have to learn how to do this, we already know. Just call us and hire us to do it." But so often in the arts, there's…except for some of the larger institutions…a real resistance to pay anyone to do something. It's like, "No, I'll just get a camera and I'll film the thing myself or my friend might film it." I think it comes from: if you're a creator, the thing that you're making, you want to be in control.
> —Lieann Koivukoski

As Lieann suggests, the time and resources required to develop a high level of competency in a new skill set suggests that it might be more effective to hire a skilled technician to do the work. For some, not doing so is the result of protecting financial resources or a general pattern of self-reliance within the industry. The training involved in developing skill sets can be challenging for smaller organizations that do not have the flexibility within a small operating budget to accommodate hiring externally. The result, however, can mean lower quality productions. The quality of the production is particularly important for emerging filmmakers and organizations that need digital productions to both maintain audience engagement and generate the income that comes with it.

Adrian Vilaca, the founder of Borderline Radio, a podcasting station in Sault Ste. Marie, has noticed that the numbers of people interested in the artistic side of the media arts have increased, but that training is needed for them to create or produce their work. This gap has made it more challenging for him to produce the podcast series for the station.

> One of the other things that I was trying to uncover with all of this was another layer of talent, not just the artists, as a performer, the audio and musician, visual artists, but the media artists, somebody who is a broadcaster, a podcaster. That part has been…I thought that would come out a lot faster.
>
> So, there's a whole different breed, which is also part of the challenge that we face right now, is [we're] finding a lot of people want to do it, and are doing it. They're just not really good at it, yet. It's really rough. The production values, like local TV, are just not…like this conversation right now with you. To do this as a conversation, who would really watch it? Now, you know, it just doesn't have the bells and whistles that the modern-day consumer has to have. And so the podcast thing, I think, requires that, and there isn't any mentoring going on. I thought I couldn't mentor because I hadn't done it. And here I am a year in. And suddenly I'm like, I really can mentor this with zero experience or very little experience. And all you have to do is really observe—this, this works, that works.
> —Adrian Vilaca, *Borderline Radio, Sault Ste. Marie*

Some arts media organizations are making formal efforts to develop opportunities for training, in order to tap into nascent talent or establish skill sets as another layer that enables representation and diversity within the industry. These opportunities take a variety of forms, from scaffolded exposure to diverse roles to developing a talent pool to finding and connecting with individuals whose skill sets can bridge a specific gap. For example, in their efforts to work with local Indigenous

communities to build inclusion and representation of Band members on productions, Edge Entertainment is trying to shift the way these connections are made.

> We have a formal program that we are working with Garden River on, that will allow us to target what the four positions are that we'll be making available. We're fitting the need -- we're not trying to create the position and then find the fit; we're trying to find four people that want to start working in film, see what *their* skill sets are, and then find the position within the crew for them. Wanita Jones from Garden River is putting together a list of who might be interested, and it doesn't have to just be students, it could be people that are changing careers. So, if an electrician doesn't want to do that anymore, and might want to be an electric [technician], then maybe there's a fit for that. So, we're trying to do it a little bit opposite than the traditional way, which is: here's what's available, who's available.
> —Rosalie Chilelli, *Producer and Managing Director, Edge Entertainment, Sault Ste. Marie*

180 Sisterhood Productions, a film company in Sault Ste. Marie, has been exploring ways to ease the transition for graduates, while simultaneously helping them build their portfolios. A key element is making students aware that they can use their resources and knowledge; that 180 Sisterhood Productions will help. The program would support those new to the field, but also help build a skilled and knowledgeable local talent pool, which the film industry needs in order to reach a critical threshold of sustainability in film. (For more about the film industry in Northern Ontario, see here and here.)

> One thing that we've been talking about doing is an anthology short series, where we would work with students and whoever is interested in film, and sort of train people in different positions and sort of work like a theatre company would, where

you rotate jobs, so that you can see what the director does, what the writer does, what the DOP [Director of Photography] does, what the art person does, what a sound person does on a small set. And, that way, you know, they all get an idea of the different jobs, and they all get to have onset experience. And they all get to also have a finished product of their work. So that's something that we hope to be doing this year as part of our programming. We have access to gear, we have access to a location to do that. And the other thing we've been doing is trying to work with the college students right now, because they are working on their short films for their end of the year project. I'm just letting them know that we're here and that if they have questions, they can always reach out to us if they are needing some help with gear, they can reach out…just letting them know that we're here to help in any way that we can even if it's just, "Is this paperwork the right one?"
> —Rebeka Herron, *owner and producer, Rusty Halo Productions; co-owner 180 Sisterhood Productions; co-founder and co-director, Sault Film Festival, Sault Ste. Marie*

The format of the mentorship, and the shifting capacity of both the mentee and the mentor, are important to consider when designing the structure of programs that may or may not apply to all participants at all times. Jen McKerral, a music agent, and formerly of Music and Film in Motion/CION in Sudbury, reflected on the music mentorship program she led:

> It was also really challenging because of the way that we tried to really put this structure around it that didn't work. Not in all cases anyway. You know, one mentee, for example, was dealing with a difficult home life. He ended up moving to Winnipeg and sort of falling off the radar for a while and, you know, stuff like that, these day-to-day realities. While there is so much potential for exactly what we set out to do, we were also

kind of up against these other sorts of realities. And that was interesting as well. Then, because of the lack of technology, he didn't have access, no matter where he was he didn't have the proper technology to be in contact. And so, keeping synched to a structured kind of calendar didn't really work either. But I think it's just one of those things that you can't necessarily call a failure, but rather just something you worked with.

—Jen McKerral, *music agent and co-organizer of Up Here Festival, Sudbury*

Across the region, the only formal mentorship programs that the conversation circles mentioned included the Indigenous Music Mentorship Program (IMMP), offered as a pilot program through Music and Film in Motion in 2019, and the film mentorship provided by NOHFC funding. The IMMP was a short pilot; it was not media arts specific. The NOHFC film mentorship investments, and an established film ecosystem, have enabled the sector to address the need to transition graduates and emerging technical labour into the formal sector. In addition, they provided the infrastructure and funding to support the outreach, connections, and training. However, this kind of long-term infrastructure doesn't exist for other media arts disciplines. There have been one-off mentorships funded to individual artists and their mentor of choice through the professional development programs offered by the CCA and OAC. These are very self-directed and project focused, but they have a short duration. The advantage is that both mentor and mentee are paid. One artist noted that it was very challenging to find a media arts mentor in her area and ended up working virtually with a Toronto-based mentor who didn't quite understand the context. In addition, the process and distance learning did not support her way of working.

Peer-to-peer learning opportunities are more informal; however, mentorship can evolve out of peer-to-peer learning. In the North, there is a particular need for disabled artists to connect and share

art practices and resources as well as opportunities and technologies that assist with adapting to new modalities such as a digital pivot. After rheumatoid arthritis sent her body, and her art practice, into completely new terrain, artist Kim Kitchen re-centred her practice on sound art and other modalities that could support her disability. She explained that she wants to connect with other artists with disabilities for studio visits in order to see and learn how they work, how they manage, and how they move in their space, but she has been unable to connect with artists with disabilities in the North.

> Ironically, one positive result of the COVID pandemic is that this digital connectivity has produced/made possible inclusive components such as access, viability, and sustainability. However, to sustain the momentum, ongoing work in this area is a must, and means advocacy, continuous attention to ways of reaching out, listening, and taking action to transform spaces and remove barriers.
> —Kim Kitchen, *multidisciplinary artist, North Bay*

New Adventures in Sound Art (NAISA), based in South River, has been an integral presence in the North. Their curated programming and proximity to North Bay has facilitated stronger relationships with artists in nearby communities. Darren Copeland, the Artistic Director and a sound artist, has worked with many of them in various mentoring and collegial roles. Nadene Thériault-Copeland, Executive Director of NAISA, talked about the mentoring role that Darren plays by sharing his expertise and experience with artists. This commitment to supporting professional development and learning has been a key component of NAISA.

> It's about organically figuring out what will work and what should work. Darren is very much—speaking for him because he never takes credit for this—he's very, very, very interested in. That's where he really, really gets the most out of the artworks

that get presented, if it happens from a period of time where he's worked with that artist and they have learned something that has furthered their understanding of electroacoustic or spatialization or media art or anything that they can work with him on. He shines as a mentor in that area and to have an artist's space and to have creation happening, that's kind of a pet project. That's something Darren would like to see more of.
—Nadene Thériault-Copeland, *Executive Director, New Adventures in Sound Art, South River*

Jen McKerral points to the advantages of "stretching out" mentorship over a long time to help relationships and connections to develop and mature, especially in an informal structure, beyond the structures of a formalized program.

> I really do think that mentorship as a concept really needs to be stretched over a long period of time. In Melody's case, for example, she lives in the same community as Darren and interacts with him on a regular basis. So that kind of prior connection really helps. It really just provided resources to the work that they're already doing. Which, you know, they brought to me as an aspect that I maybe didn't think of, because when I'm running programs, I tend to always think, I want to do something new, something that wouldn't have happened otherwise. And I want to make sure that we're kind of breaking new ground with stuff. But Melody really made me see that this work is happening, it's happening in an unpaid way. And that the resources need to be there for the work that's already being done in this [informal way]. And then with Nick as well, he knew Rico prior to [the program]. I think if we were to be making these new connections, it really is just time that will provide that sort of relationship building that you want to get out of a mentorship because this should be a longer-term thing that extends. It's proven time and time again. I did

a lot of research on mentorship as a practice, peer mentorship, specifically. And yeah, it's proven that they so often extend past the life of any kind of structured mentorship program...but you want to give it the right jumpstart. So, I guess what I'm saying is that it really should be a long-term project to make sure that you're getting the results that you want. —Jen McKerral

The importance of long-term mentorships, whether informal or formal, has been underscored by a number of circle and interview participants. Most mentorships are very context specific and time-limited and mentees do not easily transition into the industry or the media arts sector. In fact, mentees sometimes leave the arts field entirely. The periods between formal mentorships and training are important transitional times when artists need support to navigate the system, develop career strategies, develop new work, or shift into new directions in their practices.

Participants have also noted the need for long-term support for the mentees, including mentorship training and financial resources to support their time. Tracie Louttit reflected on what she experienced as she navigated the industry and, eventually, also became a mentor.

> Part of the solution is having support for mentees. Back in 2009 in Edmonton I was provided with a mentee producer position with the CFTPA, now the Canadian Media Producers Association, on the show *Mixed Blessings*. It was really great. I gained valuable on the job experience with television production. Internships are excellent for this, but the problem back then was that there wasn't transitional support for mentees to continue their training in the mainstream industry. If there was some sort of transitional support program for mentees, and more specifically, for female Indigenous producers to support them after they finish their formal training or mentorship, that would be an excellent way to transition into the mainstream

industry. Today, there are a lot more female Indigenous producers than there were 15, even 10 years ago. However, now, during these most sacred times of change with this current pandemic, as well as this call-out culture that is taking place on social media, it makes the context more challenging. A lot is coming to the surface, which is good and very much needed so that changes are made within the bigger system, otherwise, you are a small fish trying to swim upstream and that's very discouraging.

There is a lack of Ingenious female producers across Canada, and particularly in Northern Ontario. There are a handful of women who've been around in the last thirty years like Jennifer Podemski, Loretta Todd, Lisa Meeches, Tracey Kim Bonneau, and Tasha Hubbard. It's very wonderful to see more female Indigenous writers, directors, and key creatives now than there were in the late 1990s. But yes, there is a need for more training for female Indigenous producers here in Northern Ontario, it would be fantastic! —Tracie Louttit

Jenn McKerrel's experience piloting a formal mentorship program reflected what we learned from our interviews: peer mentoring and informal coaching is prevalent in the region in a variety of ways, but it is often unrecognized. Often mentorship happens between artists who know each other and have some kind of a professional or contextual relationship. The influence of media arts clusters plays out in the realm of mentorship as well: there is an organic feedback loop between artists, clusters, and their associated influences and supports that intertwines through other media arts and community networks. In turn, this enables senior and experienced artists to share information and influence others, further extending support and resources to emerging and less represented artists within the sector, as well as for those entering into the sector itself.

These informal networks are repeatedly mentioned in the interviews and are important in the region, given the lack of formal mentorship and training programs and the geographical distances between communities. They also reflect the organic ways that things happen. Formal organizations and networks aren't always successful at connecting people; instead, people rely on each other, professionally and socially (see also Zach Cassidy comments). These informal networks support the creation of work, offer opportunities for professional development, establish career/art business support, foster access points to the arts sector, and build communities of knowledge. Informal and formal mentorship networks are internalized structures for the region; they underscore the metanarrative that has emerged through this research around decentralized networks, or supported locals, in Northern Ontario. The reality is that there is already decentralization, but it is not tracked in a way that enables other organizations and artists to mimic it, develop its strengths, or tap into it consistently; its informality provides both its strength and its challenges.

A mentor matching initiative was discussed in the interviews, but without further research it is unclear how successful it would be in the region. The Music and Film in Motion Indigenous Music Mentorship program ran for only one year, but there wasn't a formal evaluation to help build the program. Jen McKerral noted, informally, that the program was definitely too short and faced challenges of distances between participants. The program was launched, however, before the COVID pandemic; given the now-increased use of digital platforms, the uptake may be different. However, it is clear from the conversations and interviews that artists appreciate the in-person and on-the-ground relationships as well as, for the most part, the long-distance mentorships when there aren't local resources within the community. And the long-term, sustained mentorship relationship is linked to long-term impact relating to the capacity of the mentee to develop their practice and career.

I find it exciting. Rachel's in the process [of producing her first film], what does she need? She is somebody who needs me. She's lucky because I am here for her. I'm talking her through her computer settings. I'm looking at her camera. Everyday she's talking to me, right? And I'm helping to facilitate this film for her, but not everybody has that. That is like that sort of on-the-ground connection. And if you had more people who could provide that, even if they're not physically there…because I've had mentors before, and they've been crap, like they've been like, "Yeah, Oh, that's great. Oh, yeah, I really like that." I've had mentors maybe talk to me for maybe 20 minutes, if I'm lucky, if I can keep their attention. So, my approach is: If you want to talk about film, I'm here. Let's talk about it because I want this too. Helping her is helping me. And I see that the more capacity we have, the more potential there is. So what does that mean? How do we encourage production in Northwestern Ontario and in Sioux Lookout?
—Nadine Arpin, *Two-Spirit Michif filmmaker, Sioux Lookout*

While informal mentorships might be framed as a response to the lack of formal opportunities, they are strongly reflective of and responsive to the changing needs of the artist and the mentor. This allows for flexibility in terms of distances, schedules, and ongoing projects. The challenge of informal mentoring, however, is that it is typically unfunded and offered in addition to other responsibilities. While flexibility helps to define the mentoring as informal, it also makes it a challenge to establish long-term, sustainable mentorships. Extended access and consistency is not a component; the limited time the mentor can offer an artist, given other responsibilities and roles, and the lack of professional development opportunities for the mentors themselves, means that the relationship is short term. Out of necessity, the mentoring relationship may have a limited focus and time.

One of the local community channels noted that they are able to offer some basic training, but without any guaranteed "next steps" that can provide follow-through:

> We take a lot of those green students, even high-school students, or people that have kind of like, reinvented themselves in a way later in life, on the set with us, and then on a one-on-one basis, like editing, training, and shooting, and then landing gear training. To get them to the point where they can produce their own content is the ultimate goal for us. The hardest part I find is similar to what I'm hearing from a number of you. As you know, the sustainability, in terms of our offering, is all volunteer. There isn't the opportunity to pay, so I can only get someone so far. And then they might be like, "Oh, wow, this is really cool." And then we lose them, or they go away, and they can't find a job. And we don't necessarily know where to point them. —Anonymous

For Lieann Koivukoski, the follow through is also of concern, although there are producers who are taking on mentees of their own accord. She feels that established producers working in the North could include a mentoring element for northerners in their productions; this would offer training and boost the sector. In addition, longer and even multi-year mentorships would strengthen the mentor-mentee relationship and offer increased training opportunities and exposure. Another positive effect would be that the "graduate" could more seamlessly move into independent work in the industry.

> Derek Dario, who is from Ottawa…he's a producer, director, writer…he has done mentorship on his own with trying to raise producers and directors. But it would be like a year or two-year-long process with him. With each of his projects, he would have somebody that would be shadowing him as a

producer, so an assistant producer, and then they've gone out and done something else on their own after that. He would be taking them on for two years because if you're doing a series, you're looking at not just one season, two seasons, three seasons, however many you get. But he did that on his own. And that would be something I would like to see with more northern producers, or somebody maybe even like David Anselmo, who has been working with Hallmark now for many years. All of those Christmas movies that have been done in North Bay, for example. If he would take on a young person who's interested in following in his footsteps or in being able to develop as a producer in Northern Ontario, that would be something I think would be a great help. —Lieann Koivukoski

Another positive effect would be that the graduate could more seamlessly move into independent work in the industry. Mentoring might also include breaking past some established norms, such as greater promotion of and positions for women in film industry-wide, and, at the executive level in the industry, regular acknowledgement and support of films by historically under-represented, and diverse, artists and teams.

> So I will tell you that I would like to see them [Cinéfest Sudbury] do more promotion with actual northern producers and directors and women. It would be really nice to see a lot more women being represented within the community. —Lieann Koivukoski

One issue with these informal networks and mentorships is that within the for-profit companies there isn't built-in support. Training to learn how to mentor and teach isn't generally available (e.g., one can be a strong artist/filmmaker but that doesn't always translate into being a strong mentor). And while there has sometimes been an expressed interest in establishing mentoring programs and networks for mentor pools, they

conflict with the fact that most formal media arts networks, including local arts councils, are historically limited in their membership and reach. The other difficulty is that they can also limit participation by acting as gatekeepers. Ultimately, lack of capacity, engagement, and limited reach with respect to diversity and representation affect the organization's abilities to take on mentoring or training in an established way.

Non-profit organizations that act as central points for gatherings and in-person access, such as libraries or media centres, faced unique pressures during the pandemic in terms of providing access to activities that would normally have been face-to-face. In shifting to a digital model, it was necessary for staff to have some training so that they could facilitate the learning of patrons and enable greater access within communities as well as continue to foster connections and relationships. The Schreiber Media Centre, a non-profit organization in Schreiber, Ontario, that provides media production services and training was established in 2020 during the pandemic, through funding from the Canadian Association of Community Television Users and Stations (CACTUS) and their Local Journalism Initiative.

> I went to the Convergence Conference in 2015 sponsored by CACTUS in Ottawa, representing libraries' maker spaces. Libraries were really opening doors to engaging the community in a lot more things that are kind of out of the box, like setting up woodworking shops and 3D printers and sewing machines. There was another librarian from the US that came up. They had a community television station attached to their library. And they were just getting their radio station. So, I got pretty excited about that. And I talked about our streaming; I think we were one of the first libraries in Canada to be streaming library and community events.

> In 2021, Fixt Point Media Arts and Media provided an opportunity for five people to receive online audio training,

which helped everyone feel more comfortable with the interview process. They have excellent templates. So, we're doing the interviewing, uploading it, and doing the indexing. And then the facilitators pulled out interesting clips and put it into an audio walk that we'll use for the community. So, you know, that was an opportunity, and we thought we would go for it. But like everything else, we're not sure what to expect. The training is very important. I mean, yes, audio equipment is a thing… because when I started using it, it was like, "Oh, I'm using the wrong mic. Oh, I'm going to the wrong point port. Oh, I haven't got my mic turned on. Oh, I'm not recording because I haven't hit the button." Basic 1-2-3. Anything beyond those three-steps, I needed training. The technology is just absolutely amazing. But I think you still need to have a connection, one-on-one, you know, initially, to get people engaged in the whole process. —Donna Mikeluk, *Schreiber Public Library CEO and Schreiber Media Centre Board Director*

Connection isn't always easy, or spontaneous and informal. Opportunities aren't always clear. Artists who identify as emerging or who are also marginalized by geography or lack of representation may not be connected to a cluster, an artistic community, or to other artists (for more about collectivity and organizing, see here). For instance, an emerging photographer in the northwest spoke about her difficulties connecting with others, as an artist, and shared her need for ways to connect with other artists, attend workshops, share work in progress, and otherwise interact on the ground.

> An art centre for all types of artists to gather and build community would be amazing in any community.
> —Anonymous

An artist in Thunder Bay, when asked what would help her create and disseminate her work, said:

Outside of time, having someone that checks in, that I could talk to, like peer support or mentoring space. That would be helpful. Also being around people who aren't artists. Having conversations with others who have different perspectives. I'm driven to explore things thematically. Activist-artist collaborations, these spaces and talks, are very inspiring.
—Jayal Chung, *Thunder Bay*

For Zach Cassidy, a physical local space is important for spurring creativity and motivation and gathering brings energy to projects and to artists. Zach prefers physical spaces and in-person contact; although technology can offer connections, face-to-face gatherings help to keep him motivated to make time for art:

> Yes, I guess with technology now, it could be both. You could do consultation with artists remotely, if you had an in-house technician. It depends on what forms of media you're working with. But in my mind, it's a physical space. That's something that has been missing for me personally as an artist, and that's part of what's made it hard for me to stay motivated on setting time aside to put effort into making art. It's so much different when you're surrounded by other artists. —Zach Cassidy

The increased use of digital platforms by individual artists and organizations opened possibilities for artistic relationships and learning opportunities in the region. Eleanor, a Thunder Bay artist notes this, and finds it positive:

> Where I live and work has become less important in the last year since there's no expectation that we'll meet in person. In Thunder Bay, there feels to be a geographic barrier to professional development opportunities, to meeting and collaborating with other artists, my whole career. That has disappeared, which is cool. —Eleanor, *Thunder Bay*

Formal mentorship programs can inject support into pre-existing and new informal relationships; tools are needed that enable those who are less connected to the local and regional media arts ecosystems to find out about any programs or possibilities that do exist. Further research would help to evaluate what is needed to encourage and establish connections. What is clear is that formal mentorship programs need to reflect the informal structures and mentor relationships that already exist. They must also be relevant to the contexts of artists and their communities.

The Temiskaming Circle discussed similar issues. They found that without consistent individual and organizational support, including infrastructure, the creation and dissemination of work and the overall energy of the community is negatively affected:

> There are very few people with the ability, support, or resources to share knowledge, no real centres set up to do so, and some sporadic enthusiasm on an individual level or the occasional short-lived project. Stable infrastructure would be key to building momentum. I get the sense that there is a broad spectrum of interest in these areas that is going unmet. These factors contribute to a general feeling of isolation and loneliness and affect youth out migration.
> —Drew Gauley, *filmmaker, Temiskaming*

Sean Meades, a professor in the Community Economic Development Program at Algoma University, and Chair of Sault Ste. Marie's Cultural Vitality Committee, noted that the city had done some work to provide support for mentoring youth with more senior artists. This initiative had evolved out of one of the six goal areas defined by the city, and had been informed by research that Sault Ste. Marie had previously gathered to help frame the city's cultural plan.

It wasn't a lot of money, but it was something, especially considering the city had never done that before. I think they've done a really fantastic job, especially with youth mentorship or creating opportunities for youth mentorship and engagement. I don't know about formalizing the mentorship opportunity, because I think that in many ways, those relationships emerge organically. But, you know, as we were talking, I was thinking, yeah, that's still gonna happen, even if you have a formal mentorship program, right? People aren't going to cease mentoring, or stop building relationships with people, just because there's a mentorship program. But that [a program] does provide those who don't know where to go to get that support, an outlet.
—Sean Meades, *Chair, Cultural Vitality Committee, City of Sault Ste. Marie*
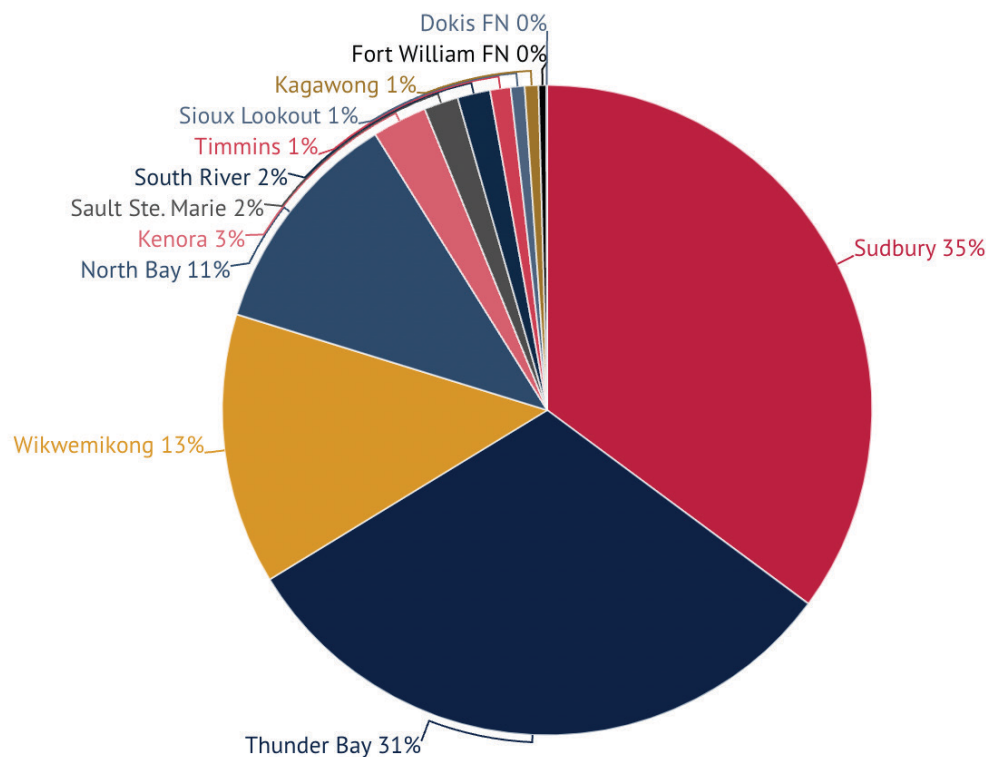
20.1 CCA/OAC Grant Percentages from CCA/OAC -- Select Cities in Northern Ontario (Fiscal Years 2017-2018 to 2019-2020).

The above chart demonstrates that while some organizations in larger communities may receive funding that could support mentoring or training, among its other priorities, the majority of organizations in communities receive very little funding or none at all. Sault Ste. Marie receives 1.7% of the allocated funding [$13,214,531.00]; this demonstrates that developing collaborations with other organizations or institutions, which might have separate funding resources, is a key way to bolster programs or develop initiatives, where possible. Otherwise, communities are reliant on volunteer and ad hoc opportunities developed out of the relationships that have been made within the community itself as part of the community dynamic.

Sometimes it's not just about matching up an artist with a mentor in the region. In some disciplines, there just aren't people with experience in facilitation or mentorship combined with training in a particular discipline. For instance, Art Fix of Nipissing was trying to support two emerging game artists from their membership as well as develop relevant programming:

> We work with artists who are not necessarily formally trained, who might be new to the arts all together. And we also produce professional-level programming and help artists work with artists in our community to grow their careers in really significant ways. We have launched at least a couple of artists to national profiles. So, we have a couple of artists in our community who are very skilled digital and media artists, but who haven't had the opportunity to grow their practice in the direction of video game arts. That's a good enough reason for us to want to pursue opportunities. This is concretely building the practice of people in our communities.

> To my knowledge and the knowledge of everyone I've spoken to at Art Fix, there is currently no organization in the region that offers programming, training, or mentorship in video game arts. There's currently no one who's capable of that, there's no organization, and no single facilitator, who's able to lead, develop and execute on programming in this video game arts field. And even professional artists working at a high level don't have access to that kind of training. —Rémi Alie

As a result, Art Fix established a connection to Hand Eye Society in Toronto and collaborated with them to help build their program (for more about Art Fix of Nipissing, see here). In order to facilitate developing the capacity of the region, Art Fix integrated a train-the-trainer aspect so that the participants not only build their artistic capacity in game arts, but also their facilitation skills. This approach enables them to support other emerging game artists. Art Fix's experience underlines the importance of institutions of support in the

region: designing a program, building a partnership, and writing the grant applications requires a level of experience and capacity, but these components might be beyond what an individual artist can or wants to do. An organization's capacity and reach, however, may offer avenues for an individual artist to receive mentorship or training, the organization benefits both in programming and in a growth in skills, and the region benefits from the development of art training.

> What that would mean is, at the conclusion of that project, we would have a qualitative shift in the art training capacity in the entire region. So, we're really excited about that twofold capacity building, both artistic capacity and also just qualitatively changing our ability to offer a fuller spectrum of our training opportunities to the community. —Rémi Alie

Art Fix of Nipissing has embarked on several collaborations to try to generate support and connections for artists and establish models that work for northern regions. In addition to finding an expert programming model for video game arts at Hand Eye Society, Art Fix engaged in a three-year collaborative scaling project (2018 to 2021) with Workman Arts out of Toronto that they adapted to include the contexts and experiences of North Bay and the organization's membership to increase relevance and access for individuals in the community with lived experience of mental health.

> The train-the-trainer model does a few things for us. It gives us local, skilled facilitators who can adapt programming to the unique, specific needs of the community. For instance, Hand Eye Society and Workman Arts developed materials and offered a major art training workshop following a more conventional model and schedule. Part of what this project would do is actually adapt that workshop model to our particular context. Just to get into the nitty-gritty of a calendar, we know that a six-week workshop where people participate for two hours on

Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays doesn't work particularly well in our community. It's too much of a time commitment up front; it's too time intensive; it's too location intensive. It also assumes access to transportation that doesn't always exist. And it usually assumes access to internet that doesn't always exist. Having local facilitators who are knowledgeable and plugged in to the regional arts context [is important], but who are also people with lived experience, who can translate, you know, what does a six-week workshop run in Toronto look like here.
—Rémi Alie

While our discussion of mentorship and training highlights many gaps in access experienced by organizations and artists alike, and focuses on local and analogue (in-person) relationships, most of the discussions refer to a pre-pandemic time. As demonstrated by the experience of the emerging Sioux Lookout collective and their pilot digital filmmaking and storytelling workshops (for more, see here), digital platforms facilitate increased inter- and intra-community mentorships and collaborations. Art Fix also adopted mobile and digital platforms. Although a fully remote/digital delivery is not ideal for their membership, designing a mobile art program had advantages; it increased their membership and, organizationally, better assisted those with mobility and internet challenges.

The artist's capacity to create work is also affected by access: to equipment (see here), to resources such as mentorship, training, and space, and to audiences. If artists spend considerable time working through multiple obstacles in order to develop their art, it shifts *what* they might create and *how*. Artists are typically creative at finding solutions when it comes to the material and conceptual needs they might have for creating art as a career. However, these barriers slow down exposure, career development, marketability, and motivation. The trajectory of northern media artists' careers and the kinds of work they create are deeply impacted.

My partner, Matt [Deadpan Studios] was facilitating a remote collaborative song writing project, essentially. What they did was provide Pro Tools, a subscription, for however long, and then folks would collaborate on recording and sending things back and forth. Part of it was this crash course on Pro Tools. He said one of his biggest challenges was assuming that musicians had any kind of base knowledge with that kind of stuff. And it was a huge barrier. They needed way, way more training than the time allowed for. And so the creative part didn't get to really happen, because the technological part kind of stood in the way.
—Jen McKerral

Yet artists often find creative ways to self-teach, co-teach, and mentor each other within informal circuits and within communities. Nadine Arpin, for instance, spoke about supporting the efforts of emerging filmmaker Rachel Garrick, and how that has made a difference for Rachel's development as an artist. Nadine monitors younger and emerging artists in the community in case they need assistance or resources. This is partly as a response to challenges she experienced in the early days of her career, but she also sees it as a culturally relevant exchange between an "elder" artist-mentor and a younger emerging artist.

> This is a hired position through Hot Docs. What Rachel's [Garrick] getting is the dream. I'm being everything for her I wish I'd had when I made my first film. This is an example of a mentorship being recognized. And I will be able to take this work even further. Not only did Hot Docs recognize my mentorship, but they also recognized that I am a new mentor, and that I have potential. They hired a mentor for me as a mentor, so that I had someone to consult with. I'm consulting about what I'm doing and then my mentor, Lisa G Nielsen, just became a part of the team. It's been very elaborate, this particular Hot Docs program. I feel, again, that our connection to Lisa Jackson and her knowing me and knowing Rachel truly

influenced and won her this opportunity to do this project. But through the process of working with Rachel, I became the online editor, sound designer, and mentor. We were given the opportunity to learn and grow as artists, a mutual learning experience. Seeing her grow and seeing her take it on was amazing. She was the lead, she was a director, she did everything she was supposed to do, and we achieved something together. This brings it back to the network; when you know people, it's easier. —Nadine Arpin

Nadine realizes that close proximity to mentors and more experienced filmmakers makes a difference to the professional development of an artist and quality of the artist's work. When Nadine started out and produced her first film, she didn't have mentors or other professionals she could lean on or rely on for their experience and support. She had to do everything herself. As a result, the colourization and sound weren't as high a quality as they could have been. These can be unavoidable components, given the range of skills that an artist learns and enacts to complete a project, but it can affect submissions to festivals and grant applications. She spoke about local training programs through HRSDC, and the gaps these programs aren't filling.

> How many WordPerfect administrators, office assistants, can you pump out? This is classic government expenditure mandates where they provide funding with no prospects. I mean there are some ridiculous number of registered plumbers in Lac Seul because they did a program and everyone became a plumber. It's one-skill overkill. Pumping out filmmakers is not the same thing. There's only so many sinks you can fix, but films…you can just keep making them. There are so many stories that can be told.

> So, the thing about Rachel [Garrick] which I love, is we're working together right now and I think the possibilities are

endless. Rachel is in the process of making her first film. She was the producer in a producer/director film made through the NSI Aboriginal Docs program back in 2016, which was a film developed about one of her own family stories. And now she's taken what she learned through that initial project and applied it to another story, but she's doing it on her own, it's her own vision. It's her understanding. And it's a film which will be screened at Hot Docs! I find it exciting; she's in the process of creating a new work. What does she need? She needed someone like me for support. Frankly, she is lucky I live here too. Every day we talked I helped her to navigate the process of making one's first film. Not everyone has that. This is an on-the-ground connection, a living network. If you had more people who could provide that, even if they're not physically there, it would help. However, I've had mentors before, and they've been crap; they've been like, "Yeah, oh, that's great" or "Oh, yeah, I really like that." I've had mentors, talk to me for maybe 20 minutes, if I'm lucky, if I can keep their attention. This is not the type of mentorship we need. So, my approach to it is, you want to talk about film, I'm here, let's talk about it because I want this too. Helping Rachel is helping me. And I see that the more capacity we have, the more potential to create. —Nadine Arpin

Rebeka Herron sees her development of the Sault Film Festival, with Trish Rainone, as a way to create a platform for filmmakers to network and highlight their work. Eventually, she envisions training sessions, offered through the festival, that can travel directly into communities across the North.

> With the Sault Film Festival, because it is a non-profit, we want to offer some kind of training opportunities for these non-key positions to get people started. And so right now we're starting to do a video series and podcast series to at least start virtually because of COVID. This and the other idea we had was to eventually travel with the festival, but also travel with training. And so the festival could be curated in the city. But it takes a coordinator and there isn't the funding for that, which is often quite scarce in a non-profit kind of world. —Rebeka Herron

While mentorship and training programs are available to some degree in Northern Ontario, and in other regions, and there have been training programs delivered in the North by southern groups, context is the most critical element for developing ongoing programs that last. Ownership of the design and format and delivery of the training and mentorship is important -- it's not just a case of hiring facilitators from anywhere to provide training for northern artists. As Rémi Alie points out, their game arts train-the-trainer program isn't just a way to deliver training in the community where there is an identified gap. The methodology and the northern context is important: how they do it, and who does it, are primary concerns.

> The train-the-trainer project offers us the capacity and flexibility to take knowledge that works in other contexts and then have people on the ground who are fully integrated into our community who are making that act of translation. That's one big piece. I'd add it's not just about having local facilitation, it's also about avoiding people coming from outside the community and bringing their own stories and voices in ways that may be well meant, but that aren't culturally contextualized. And in our particular community, we're a collective by and for artists with lived experiences, who may have intersecting identities that overlap with equity-seeking communities. In that context, the idea of community agency and control definitely becomes very urgent. It's much healthier to have local artists and facilitators creating programming that is appropriate, rather than the dynamic of someone, an expert, coming from outside. Having local capacity means that now it's our project, now we

own it [not a Southern Ontario organization]. We own the work that's being done. —Rémi Alie

Mentorship isn't only for individual artists. As we've repeatedly seen throughout the research, institutions of support (established arts organizations, galleries, libraries, formal networks) deeply influence the local and regional digital arts ecosystems. Sometimes emerging organizations and ad hoc collectives need support in their development, such as a host organization acting as a lead applicant on grant applications or providing administrative support similar to the role White Water Gallery plays as an administrative "nest" for Art Fix. In small and rural communities, however, there may not be an established organization or a large enough pool of experienced administrators or artists with matching skills and capacity.

> On the grant application side of things, I've only done them once or twice [for film]. I did them a few times about ten years ago when I was playing in a band that was looking for funding. And we were successful with getting funding for the music side of it. I've always found them to be a little bit complicated. And a lot of it is vague. Like, how much info do they want, how much info is too much? Having somebody that you can communicate with, even to proofread your grant before you submit it and being like, you need to work on this a little bit, this isn't very strong, this is good. I think that would help a lot as well. So, from personal experience, I'd be interested in connecting with people finding out more information about how to get passion projects rolling or gear or funding.
> —Jimmie Chiverelli, *independent filmmaker, Sault Ste. Marie*

Nadene Thériault-Copeland and Darren Copeland of NAISA have found that workshops and educational programming are key elements of developing an audience, building the artistic and technical capacity of artists, and contributing to a stronger arts ecosystem. NAISA, like other institutions of support, provide the infrastructure that helps artists, collectives, and organizations create and disseminate work, build capacity, and further contribute to the strengthening of the regional media arts community.

> We discovered early on that the way to get people to your events was to have a workshop or a sound walk or something that would teach them a little bit about what it was that the composer or the artist or whatever was doing. And I think also learning through doing. And we did that almost from day one. We did it from the first venue…discovering that okay, well, we have this thing that no one seems to understand: What's spatialization? What's electroacoustic? What's this? What's that? What's digital audio? You know, what is any of that? So, right from the get-go, we started with workshops, and there would be people that would come from the local community and from afar, and they'd take the workshop, and then they'd start coming to our events, and then they'd start going to this, that and the other thing. So, we built our audience almost from the workshops that we did in the beginning…and from the installations that we put on. —Nadene Thériault-Copeland

When NAISA started in Toronto several decades ago, they didn't have an audience for sound art as a creative field. They built in educational components such as soundwalks to familiarize the audience they did have and to cultivate a larger audience. They also offered workshops led by experienced practitioners so that other artists could attend and benefit. It had the effect of opening the field and engaging younger, emerging, and curious artists. When the organization moved to Northern Ontario (for more about NAISA, see here) their philosophy and outreach was adapted for their new location and has similarly benefitted artists and the community. There is a ripple effect.

> Yeah, even in Toronto, we didn't necessarily have an audience of people that knew our field when we began 20 years ago. We

had to build education into our programming and in order to develop, and also so that the artists who were around in Toronto, who were just kind of emerging in the field and getting their feet wet in it, if we could bring in someone from outside who had lots of experience, they could do a short workshop with them. That opened up a whole thing for those younger artists, or not necessarily younger, but encouraging people new to the field. So, we've kind of carried that same philosophy [into their work from their new location in South River] and we find it more fulfilling that when an artist comes they're able to share their knowledge with other people, whether it's doing a school workshop with kids, or doing a specialized workshop with other artists, or even an artist talk. The more ways that that knowledge is shared, then the healthier the scene is whether it's defined by discipline, or geography, or whatever. It also raises the interest in the event that you're presenting with that artist so that the audience who experiences that event now has the information they learned from the workshop in their minds while they're experiencing the work. You suddenly have an audience of experts that you may not have had before. When we started 20 years ago, we assumed there was no audience for our field, even in Toronto. So, we just carried that same mentality with us out here. And with the virtual context too. When we did the workshops online we were still getting a mixture, from people who are completely new to the field to people who had years and years of experience…sometimes as much experience as the person giving the workshop. So those things are really valuable for strengthening the community. —Darren Copeland

Institutions of support such as established organizations, galleries, and educational programs help build critical discourse and meaningful engagement, even where there aren't formal curatorial graduate programs. Dr. Jude Ortiz, the lead researcher at the NORDIK Institute in Sault Ste. Marie, spoke about the role of these engagements in our interview, referencing her co-authored report *Culture, creativity and the arts: Building resilience in Northern Ontario*[4]:

> Additionally, opportunities for critical discourse, fostering understanding of place and cultural excellence are gaps. Educational programs, conferences, symposia, research and exhibitions investigating and celebrating our history, natural and cultural heritage and identity through increased understanding of the links between arts, environment, quality of life and the creative economy, and the development of local, regional, and global connectivity, would lead to the development of industry clusters. Educational opportunities of such nature would also enable artists to articulate their practice and increase broader public appreciation for, and understanding of, the sector, thereby encouraging cultural appreciation, cultural diversity and continuance, and investment.
>
> —Dr. Jude Ortiz, *Senior Research Coordinator, Northern Ontario Research Development and Knowledge (NORDIK) Institute, Sault Ste. Marie*

The NORDIK Institute's findings echo ours: these engagements contribute to building experienced, thought-full, critically reflective, contemporary practices in the region. Media arts clusters emerge to further support other groups and organizations, curators, and media artists and foster research, art creation, and dissemination. Formal infrastructure and informal circles, gatherings and conversations are each important as singular components of a media arts community in the North; they are also important in the ways that they interact with one another, highlighting their nuanced reliances and suggesting ways that

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4 Jude Ortiz and Gayle Broad, *Culture, Creativity and the Arts, Achieving Community Resilience and Sustainability Though the Arts in Sault Ste. Marie* (Sault Ste. Marie: NORDIK Institute, 2007), https://nordikinstitute.com/research/culture-creativity-and-the-arts-achieving-community-resilience-and-sustainability-through-the-arts-in-sault-ste-marie/.

both structures, if developed to their strengths, would fill gaps in access and encourage a self-reliant and interconnected media arts sector in Northern Ontario.

What these conversations suggest:

Hybrid digital/analogue methods: Artists and organizations need hybrid and highly local (and networked local) responses to their mentorship and training needs. While digital technologies and online platforms are enabling artists to create work and disseminate it online, artists often note that at various points in their careers they need in-person training and access to learning—such as when working with new material, equipment, or technology or developing a set of necessary skills. On-going mentorship helps build and maintain momentum and connection, whereas training occurs at specific stages.

Training: There are many highly experienced media arts administrators and media artists with a range of skills in Northern Ontario, yet there continues to be a tendency for northern artists to consider southern artists and urban centres as central locations for professional artists and training. While it can be beneficial to learn a skill or gain knowledge from someone with expertise who lives outside the region, especially if knowledge of that skill is unavailable, accessing knowledge from mentors in northern Ontario helps to build capacity within the region. It is necessary to shift the "gaze" from the urban south as a centre. Seeking training or mentorship locally or regionally establishes an informal infrastructure of knowledge and expertise which can continue to be shared, Ultimately, it contributes to a regional media arts ecosystem.

Local and regional symposia, conferences, gatherings, and other events are important: they gather artists together to engage with critical issues in contemporary art, build connections, enable and promote relevant contextual and cultural knowledge exchange in terms of regional practices, and are important aspects of raising the profile of contemporary practices. HRSDC and others might consider establishing training programs for cultural workers and offering arts-based technical skills development such as arts administration. Graduates could be supported with ways to access contracts and work across the region. This might be achieved through a database or a digital platform that connects organizations, independent artists, galleries, and trained workers.

Funder outreach and support: We frequently heard from artists and organizations that they would benefit from more robust and consistent support from funding agencies to provide information about grants, help navigate the process, and provide guidance on applications. Artists in the northeast referenced the loss of the OAC Northeastern representative. As there are no organizations in the region with the mandate to build capacity for artists and organizations, there is a gap in this kind of professional development (some local arts councils have hosted presentations by the OAC, but typically don't provide grant writing support).

Individual artist mentoring: Mentoring is a vital element for media artists to learn and develop the artistic and technical aspects of their discipline as well as the professional aspects of managing the business aspects of their career. While there are a few formal opportunities for mentorship through the NOHFC program (film mentorships and the regular internship program), a great deal of informal, and generally unpaid, mentorship occurs in the region. This has mixed success due to the capacity of the mentor (mentorship skills and time). Artists note a number of important aspects of informal mentoring in contrast to formal training: informal training allows responsiveness to context, such as the changing and emerging needs of the artist during a project and as a career over time, and it can be responsive to distances, particularly within the current digital environment. Mentorships deepen the media

arts ecosystem, and often result in collaborations between emerging artists and more established ones.

Organizational mentoring: The role of mentorship for other emerging or unincorporated and ad hoc media arts organizations is overlooked but important. Mentorship and "nesting" help organizations as they build toward establishing an incorporated entity, if that is the desired direction. It can provide shadow support to ad hoc media organizations and enable them to deliver their programming. Small organizations (incorporated or not) are ineligible for operating/core funding with the OAC and CCA. Extremely limited options for applying for operating funding are a direct result of the elimination of the Arts Service Projects and Compass grants at the OAC (post–Ford government cuts). There is a cascade effect: the only funding opportunities with the OAC for operating funding is the Northern Arts Projects program, which is increasingly under pressure to meet the demands of other programs that were reduced, closed, or otherwise highly subscribed. While the host organization can potentially offset the costs of administrative functions (such as accounting and reporting) using a small fee incorporated into the project grants, the regular project grants at the OAC have little room to support costs above and beyond direct project expenses.

The NOHFC internship program is one avenue for organizations to hire newly graduated students, but the program is not accessible for many organizations because of a mix of requirements that tend to exclude, rather than promote, internships. These requirements do not broadly accommodate northern contexts. For example, an organization must have a full-time supervisor, a full-time office, and typically, a contribution of nearly $6,000. Organizations with strong operating budgets can more easily handle this expense, whereas small organizations without operating funding and small budgets cannot manage hiring an intern but may have highly skilled staff who can mentor. In addition, as the program only supports newly graduated

students, not self-taught or emerging artists, organizations cannot hire artists within the field that could benefit from the internship experience. While NOHFC expanded the program criteria to allow people outside of the region to be hired (as a result of organizations having trouble finding a pool of recent graduates within the required field), this leaves behind a pool of northern people who don't have formal training. In addition, the internship program only allows a single year internship and doesn't allow repeat hires for the same position; this means that mentors and supervisors spend a great deal of time onboarding and training an intern before they are really ready to take on responsibilities within the organization. The ineligibility to re-hire interns for similar positions means that organizations have to constantly restructure, or design, new projects; they are unable to deepen their mentoring and training capacity within a particular skill set.

Connecting mentors and mentees: Artists noted that both formal and informal mentoring is inconsistent, and that people often don't know who in the region has the skills and capacity to mentor. Mentorship needs to be long-term, well matched, responsive, and flexible to distance (virtual). There is a need for higher visibility of artists and their work; there is a parallel need to link people, and opportunities, together. This could be informally done via a Facebook group, a Discord channel, or more formally, through an organization in the region with a simple database of experienced arts administrators, coaches, mentors, and artists who can offer artists a range of skills.

Mentorship needs to develop responsibility. Mentees must have ownership over the direction of the training. Many mentorship and training programs need to not only fill needs for lower-level skills (such as tech crews in the film industry), but also support artistic development and direction set by the mentee.

NOHFC strategies:

- Allow organizations with a strong history of programming and evidence of administrative capacity to apply (both formally incorporated and unincorporate applicants).
- Allow ad hoc and incorporated organizations to share an intern in order to increase the flexibility of the program.
- Enable the employment of demonstrably talented people from the region, who would benefit from an internship, whether formally trained/graduated or not.
- Allow a re-hire into similar positions so that institutions of support become skilled at training for particular positions (such as arts administration, curatorial, arts education, or communications).
- Allow mentorships of varying durations, such as months or years; enable part-time mentorships to allow for leveraging and training; and allow for flexibility in the scope of the mentorship, as defined by the needs of the applicant.
- Expand the film mentorship program to allow other professional media artists to mentor artists (game arts, independent filmmakers, curators).
- Expand the program to allow intra-organizational mentorship and nesting to build arts administration capacity with the sector, which would mean mentorship of existing staff and volunteers within organizations.
- Adapt the required financial contribution so that the program is more accessible to smaller organizations. For instance, one strategy might be a sliding scale, or percent maximum of the annual operating budget.
- Consider maintaining a database of experienced arts administrators, coaches, mentors, and artists with a range of skills.
- Consider providing coaching and mentoring training, at no cost to mentors, to increase the proficiency of the mentors and the success of the internship program.

- For all internships and mentorships, ensure that applications include opportunities for meaningful training, with increased responsibilities (aligned with capacity) throughout the mentorship. Specifically, for film, ensure meaningful mentorships and include positions that help build the talent pool in the region toward the production and creation of northern stories. These include directing, producing, and camera—not only crew positions that support satellite companies. In addition, establish a weighted system with points for northern•owned companies and a diversity of positions.

Further research: Further research is needed to understand, more deeply, the role, impact, and process of informal and peer-to-peer mentorship along with formal opportunities in the region.

**EQUIPMENT, TECH
+ RESOURCE SHARING:**
DIGITAL CONNECTIONS

Kim Kitchen, *To Re-convene // To Shoreline* (2021). Lake Nipissing, silk. Photo: Liz Lott with Kim Kitchen.

EQUIPMENT, TECH, + RESOURCE SHARING:
DIGITAL CONNECTIONS

Equipment rental has been a huge challenge. Having access to equipment through professional rental services or film co-ops would be awesome up here. I was just thinking back to a few of the cities that I lived in which had film co-ops, which are not-for-profit artist-run centres for film, video, and media artists. These co-ops generally create and facilitate a space for artists to gain access to production facilities and equipment at affordable prices, distribution, exhibition (film festivals, screenings), training (workshops for all levels), and networking with local and other media makers and artists. Having a film co-op up would definitely be a great way to nurture and sustain the film community here in Baawating and beyond.
—Tracie Louttit, *film producer and director, Garden River First Nation*

I feel isolated. I'm not comfortable with Zoom, and there is restricted access to supplies. Not everyone has a credit card to order supplies online.—Sacha Mayo, *Thunder Bay*

I'm being mentored in photography and learning how to use Photoshop. This involves phone calls, online visiting, and now developing my own style. There is always panic about new work for me, about what's in my brain going out into the world. It's like rappelling off a cliff (I've done that too, and it's terrifying). The most difficult thing still is navigating all these platforms, this technology. I'm older. And I really hate social media. I wrote a proposal in 2019 to learn some of these platforms [such as sound production software called Reaper].

I'm writing and learning in Final Draft and editing in Final Cut Pro. Playing. I've fallen in love with the beat board!

—ElizaBeth Hill, *singer-songwriter and multidisciplinary artist, Mohawk from the Six Nations of the Grand River Territory, Thunder Bay*

In order to make the digital transition, I would need a webcam and another laptop. I have one but it's getting older and I know I'll have to replace it soon. I also need all the digital tools that I'd want to use, but they are costly, and I'd need the knowledge to use those tools.—Anonymous

Artists in Northern Ontario who create and connect digitally, are those who have access to a range of equipment and technologies. These include viable broadband and a variety of scaffolds for funding, mentoring, and dissemination, such as media arts organizations and collectives, galleries, curators, established media artists, and arts service organizations. All of these help with establishing enabling stronger artistic relationships and building an audience.

Starting my own TV show was a very steep learning curve. And I only had one real avenue to connect to and that was Weengushk Film Institute. They're First Nations, they're in my community, I know them well, and they had everything that I needed to be successful.
—Neil Debassige, *producer and founder, Fuel the Fire TV, M'Chigeeng First Nation, Manitoulin Island*

Neil Debassige, producer and content creator of Fuel the Fire TV, was able to access Weengushk Film Institute's (WFI) equipment because he has a prior relationship with the organization through his role as a guide for their land-based training. Typically, however, Manitoulin Island residents can't rent WFI equipment.

Neil's vision was made possible by WFI's support. They provided access to equipment, post-production resources and filmmaking expertise—resources that, geographically, financially, and technically, were otherwise out of his reach. Their expertise helped him to manage his learning curves and he now does his own production and post-production. Few Northern Ontario artists, particularly in rural areas, have access to these kinds of resources.

Neil's experience is not the norm. When artists are developing a project, and this includes artists who are also working commercially, equipment often has to be purchased in order to embark on the project; rentals and free access are not highly accessible. The financial means to buy equipment is an issue for most and arts council funding generally doesn't support capital purchases. Reflecting on his success with a Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation (NOHFC) grant to purchase equipment for his commercial film business, Zach Cassidy, of Casa di Media Productions in Timmins, observes some of the choices he made as an artist working in the North:

> I hadn't really thought about this before we sat down to talk. I'm sort of blurring the lines between commercial and artistic work. But that is the nature of where I'm at. There always is this blur. I've received funding for the business, but the business has been my means of having a way to get equipment so that I can eventually produce artistic work. I had to veer away from the artistic side and more toward the commercial side because part of the challenge of being in the north somewhere like Timmins is there is nowhere to rent equipment. You have to keep buying it on your own. —Zach Cassidy, *filmmaker, Timmins*

Many artists, particularly media artists contending with high requirements for equipment and technology, turn to commercial work (which might include starting their own business venture) such as commercial videos, client-based digital design work, or other activities, to support them financially. Media artists, who are able to produce commercial products, can sometimes access business funds to assist with the high cost of digital media equipment, but they must demonstrate that their business is potentially viable. More regularly, however, artists fall between the cracks of business and arts funding sources; the requirements of both do not accommodate the needs and practices of artists. For example, business programs do not tend to define artists as businesses and generally do not fund art-based business costs; arts grants consider capital expenses ineligible. Recently, the Canada Council for the Arts (CCA) has begun to allow up to $1,000 in equipment expenses and the Ontario Arts Council's (OAC) one-time COVID response grant of $1.6 million (individual artists, ad hoc groups and collectives, and arts organizations) created a line to include equipment expenses. That one-time OAC grant deadline funded 348 individual artists[1] which indicates the high need for digital equipment, while the CCA grant is barely enough to cover a very simple camera.

> Capital purchases, such as equipment, aren't eligible. Say you apply to create a photo series, but you're missing the lens. They will fund you to do that project but somehow you have to find the equipment outside of the grant. This limitation is a kick in the pants for people who are working from Northwestern Ontario, because we don't have access to rental spaces. So we can't just work it into the budget. But this same grant can support adding expenses or rental and shipping though. Honestly, the amount of money I'm spending to borrow a piece of equipment, it's actually more than the cost for me to buy it for myself, and then it's a one-time use. This is one of these weird glitches in the funding system.
> —Nadine Arpin, *Two-Spirit Michif filmmaker, Sioux Lookout*

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1   See https://www.arts.on.ca/getattachment/News-and-Publications/Publications/Annual-Report-2020-2021/OAC-Annual-Report-2020-2021-(1).pdf.aspx?lang=en-CA&ext=.pdf, 17.

While Neil Debassige's success with Fuel the Fire TV and the flexibility of his commercial business has enabled him to also explore some "passion projects," the equipment gap in Northern Ontario contributes to the challenges to develop creative work. Graduates of art and film schools, for example, turn to commercial production as more financially viable when they aren't able to access the film industry or produce independent art films. This is particularly true of graduates far from the urban film centres in the region.

Video and film production have high equipment demands, including ongoing financial expenditures related to greater initial cost, replacement and repair, and obsolescence. The costs are a challenge for all filmmakers across Canada and entail a negotiation between craft and capacity. If professional filmmakers who apply to arts councils to fund mid-range projects are successful, they can use the funds to lease equipment. They also have the option to slowly purchase their own equipment, which they can lease back to themselves for each project. However, equipment can have particular functions and uses. As one artist told us, it can take years to learn which equipment works for you and your particular approach or needs. While major productions typically rent equipment, emerging or mid-career artists experience obstacles in terms of their technical needs. Equipment needs, gaps, and the digital requirements needed for dissemination also affects artists who explore hybrid forms and whose work crosses disciplines, and access, skill, and expense issues echo across the region. An emerging photographer in the northwest spoke about the expense of equipment and the challenges these costs pose to building a practice. She noted that in urban areas there are camera shops and spaces that rent equipment so you are able to test out equipment.

> Equipment is expensive and renting in northern communities is not an option. —Anonymous

It just became so expensive. At the end of it all, even being down south, but especially so up north, because I find it's even more expensive up north, unless you want to get something not as good quality, or that doesn't translate well when you put it on paper. It's kind of disheartening, I find.
— Tejhler Leadbeater, *Sault Ste. Marie*

I was asked to do a collage for a group exhibit at a big gallery in Denver, Colorado. Because of the pandemic, I could not find a basic printer anywhere. I had to make do with what I had at home. I went old school, analogue, and used 20-year-old photos that I cut and pasted with mod podge instead of using Photoshop because I don't have a printer. It's probably a better piece because of that. It looks vintage! I bought a brand new computer—still waiting for it to off-gas. I'll have less obstacles. The Gardiner Museum wanted everything in PDF format and my old computer was barely chugging along. Zoom meetings are currently through my phone, and I've had so many problems with my phone. Access is having appropriate technology. I could use a better microphone or webcam.
—Michel Dumont, *Two-Spirit artist, Thunder Bay / Lake Helen First Nation*

When I graduated from Humber, I hooked up with a writing partner, but we were writers who only knew other writers. We didn't know how to access equipment, how to access funding. I was excited to attend Weengushk because it was a program that allowed me to both write and film my projects with high-level equipment. —Alex S., *Weengushk Film Institute graduate*

Musicians and arts organizations such as the Timmins Symphony Orchestra are increasingly developing new media practices, including online performances, podcast releases, and other digital strategies. This is largely in response to the realities of geography and the expenses and environmental impacts of touring, in combination with the effects of COVID. Josh Wood, the Artistic Director of the Timmins Symphony Orchestra, spoke about the pivot to digital performances during the pandemic, including collaboration with other groups:

> We recorded the concerts; we've done two so far and streamed them via Facebook Live and YouTube live streaming. Pre-recorded streaming was nice because it gave a sense of being live. [We collaborated with] the dance schools for the Christmas concerts. We reached out and they recorded along…I sent them a rehearsal track with basic tempos and they rehearsed, then I sent the audio track, they used it and recorded it, then I lined that up alongside the orchestra. We started doing Zoom rehearsals. I'd play their parts by Zoom and they'd be muted, then I took the orchestra's audio once recorded and sent a guide track…a click track for them to perform along with. They performed their parts, then I lined each individual video alongside the orchestra. All online, and I didn't have a background. If you're a music student and you want to advance yourself, you've had to make recordings of yourself for festivals and so on. You learn the basics, but nothing like this. There were a couple early workshops that were done that were important, crucial. Orchestras Canada (Donovan Seidel) put together the basics of Mosaic and he explained how to set this up in the early days of the pandemic.
> —Josh Wood, *Music Director and Conductor, Timmins Symphony Orchestra*

When an artist switches from live performance to digital methods, the knowledge transitions don't always match. One participant in the Temiskaming circles talked about how his skills as a musician are fine-tuned to the live performance experience. He felt that his live performances were professional, but that the transfer to performing in an on-line digital way was an almost insurmountable task where various technical obstacles prevented a smooth transition. An assortment of digital equipment, and an entirely new skill set, both very removed from his knowledge and expertise as a musician, obstructed the relationship between his digital audience and the performance of his music.

In the case of New Adventures in Sound Art (NAISA), based in South River, it was equipment that influenced how they eventually identified themselves as an organization. NAISA is interdisciplinary; its projects can manoeuvre between sound works and performance, presenting, installation, and music.

> We require lots of technology and equipment resources, whereas a music organization, all they need is a space, a piano perhaps, and some music stands, you know, you can cobble together the rest. But for media arts, it's not like that. Music [funding programs] would look really strangely at the idea of buying equipment. Anything like acquiring equipment would be kind of a suspicious thing. Why do you need equipment? You just bring your instrument. So, then we would be under-funding performer costs because we didn't have the performer. We just didn't fit the model, really. I think aesthetically it wasn't an issue, but it was just the way that we needed to operate, and it was similar for other organizations like us, that made moves towards media arts as well. —Darren Copeland, *Artistic Director, New Adventures in Sound Art, South River*

In some cases, communities have equipment and a stock of material, but lack the resources and know-how to transform the raw footage into finished work. For instance, Dokis First Nation accessed funding to purchase equipment for an archival project at the Dokis Museum and

has been working for many years recording Elders and documenting local history:

> We're in a fortunate situation where we have a lot of content. And we're fortunate to be in a position where we have a lot of the equipment available to us. The thing that we're lacking is the resources to be able to actually digitize everything and organize all of this content. I would say that's the one thing that we're lacking at this moment. Digital media [grant and other announcements] is definitely something that doesn't come across my desk very often. I'm not aware of cold calls for proposals and stuff like that. —Randy Restoule, *Dokis First Nation*

In other cases, an artist's limited skills or comfort levels with technology affects or strains their collaborations. Isabelle Michaud, a podcaster and interdisciplinary artist in Sault Ste. Marie, experienced challenges in her efforts to curate media-based work with artists who were either unfamiliar with technology or resistant to media arts/new media, in combination less visible issues associated with gendered and sometimes unsafe virtual environments:

> The video making using my iPhone and iMovie had already started because I felt, in 2013/14, that this was where people were headed, and I was trying to stay on top of things. But the openness of YouTube scared me, especially for the reasons I mentioned, the fact that women are harassed beyond belief online. Thankfully there are "non-listed" settings you can use to send links, so that's good.

> I had made a call for submissions for a project I had put together with BRAVO for the 30th anniversary. It was to be a simple one minute "soundscape" mix of ten images with sound, called *Paysages sonores*. I was not able to get a lot of responses. I think

the small number of submissions was because the artists were scared of using technology. They didn't know how. I made a few Zoom connections with some of the artists and made my own tutorial on how to mix video with the iMovie app on your phone. Some of the artists were very open to try, even though they didn't know how, they actually managed to get something quite good together.

> About the initial discomfort, yes, they said that they are not sound artists, and they don't have a smartphone, or they don't know how to work with photos, videos, etc. I Zoomed with two artists from the central region. Both of them were against this project from the start because of the "new media" aspect of *Paysages sonores*. One said she hates sound art and actually mocked me and was very negative about the project altogether. —Isabelle Michaud, *visual artist and podcaster, Sault Ste. Marie*

There are many nuances to equipment issues, such as appropriate technology, affordability, and access. It is also about *how* technology, equipment, and virtual environments intersect with particular ways of being, doing, and making work. Community engaged arts have been particularly challenged by the digital pivot and the pandemic-caused restrictions for in-person and shared space activities. This is exacerbated for those with disabilities and/or sensory preferences.

> It's very challenging for artists who have a community-engaged component to their work and those who work with sensory elements, and who, even before COVID, were attempting to move people away from their screens through sensory interactions. I've been questioning everything. The basis of my work is about interacting with our world through our senses (accessing memory through our senses). I did an exciting and creative project on Zoom with Jumblies [Theatre]. I observed that the woman working on the creative movement element

could really respond in a genuine way through that little square. But when it came to performance and the spontaneous elements, the technology became a barrier for me. I made all kinds of "errors" in my confusion. On Zoom, the creative process elements were positive, but the performance elements had additional challenges for me. However, I applaud Jumblies for taking the Zoom platform, which was never designed for creative use, and pushing the limits of what was possible. I learned a lot about the possibilities and drawbacks.
—Eleanor, *Thunder Bay*

Technology, in combination with virtual media, may not be the solution for all artists. Hybrid forms and off-line, low-tech/no-tech engagements and creation are both more viable and more meaningful in some contexts. The pathway to developing creative work includes access to equipment, but resources and learning support are equally important. In the media arts in Northern Ontario, there is a lack of formal and informal learning programs that teach artists the technical and creative skills of production and post-production. While there are a number of film schools in the region, these are particularly focused on television and film production, not necessarily contemporary practices like performance, installation, photography, and other non-traditional forms. In addition, these are full-time programs in the urban centres of the region. The courses are not available to students that aren't enrolled in the full program, and the programs may be geographically inaccessible, particularly for those in rural regions (for an in-depth read about mentorship, training, and education, see here) who may need training for a particular skill set, piece of equipment, or within the context of specific project. An artist on Manitoulin Island noted:

> I was lucky to receive arts council funding to develop a series of short videos. That included rental of equipment, but the cost to rent and ship the video camera from Near North multiple times, was prohibitive. The grant money just didn't cover that full cost, and it made it very difficult to follow the process-based aspects of the work. My project just didn't work with set times for shooting the way it works in traditional film production. What was equally frustrating is that it was very difficult to learn how to use the equipment. I'm not a *digital* learner. I can't sit on a computer and watch YouTube videos and figure out how to do this stuff. I need hands-on, on-the ground learning, from a person, and within the context of what I'm doing. Abstract learning doesn't work for me. So, I ended up buying a very basic camera that didn't even have any lighting control functions and leased it back to myself to meet the grant parameters. My mentor was in Southern Ontario, which made it very difficult for me to learn, compounded by COVID and her being unable to come up here in person. We did online learning, but that wasn't ideal for me. I ended up hiring Jonny Zagula to help me learn my camera a bit more and to teach me the basics of DaVinci Resolve, but the funding I had to hire him was limited, and in the end, I'm not very confident with video work. My project wouldn't have happened without Jonny's support, and that support really is connected to there being a professional film school on the Island because Jonny moved here for WFI [Weengushk Film Institute]. These local networks and informal supports have been crucial to my practice. Similarly, I've supported other artists to develop their practices, and so a cluster of successful applications and artists is emerging in my tiny town. —Anonymous

While equipment is primary to the production of digital work, there are other aspects that are required in order to transition from accessing and exploring the limits and possibilities of technology into creating and producing work.

> I already had some self-taught skills that I learned because, one, I was interested in new media/new technology; two, because

I felt I had to stay on top of things, remain relevant; and three, because sometimes you need to use your camera to take photos of your work and so forth. But the entry into the "art world" as a "media artist" is nearly impossible for me because I cannot access media circles. SMAC 360 at 180 Projects in 2015/2016 was an attempt at doing that but it fell quickly for various reasons, people left, moved, the funding was temporary, the teaching/workshops were not well attended. Personalities clashed. —Isabelle Michaud

I met Jordan in the Digital Creator program in Sioux Lookout,[2] which is a satellite media arts lab located in the Sioux Lookout library. Jordan was already well oriented in media arts. They do a lot of costumes, self-portraits, and various trans characters. So, I asked them, "You seem to have access, there's equipment everywhere. What are your challenges?" And although Jordan was probably one of the most productive and prolific of the attendees, the Digital Creator program still had limited outreach in the context of the skill development and guided experience. They offered no guidance for distribution, resulting in minimal ways for young creatives to take their interests to the next level. —Nadine Arpin

Speaking about her own trajectory as a filmmaker, Nadine noted how, when she started making her films 20 years ago, she had to figure it out on her own:

When I first became disillusioned with the urban Toronto art scene, I moved to a 64-acre property outside Vermillion Bay. I had a Hi-8 video cam and a 15-inch TV/VCR which allowed me to do on-the-fly straight cuts. Women's Place in Kenora was

our first gig. I shot and edited their Women's Day march event for $150. But still it was the beginning. Documentation became very important to me after this initial experience and I went on to form the production company Full Circle Recordings, working with NGOs and community groups for 15 years. I fell in love with my home, and I realized I wanted to tell the stories from the place that shaped me, the place I ran to the city to escape at the age of 19. —Nadine Arpin

Not only did Nadine have very basic equipment, but she also didn't have the know-how. This meant that the colourization of her films was imprecise and the audio not great. The lower quality work, as a result, had an effect on her ability to raise her profile as an artist. To gain access to festivals and other distribution networks and to provide high quality support material for grant applications the work has to be highly professional. Nadine now helps other artists to access and learn to use the equipment; she makes herself available for as a mentor or just for help on projects. She says that had she had this support, things would have been very different for her.

Darren Copeland at NAISA spoke about the disconnect that sometimes happens in the region. There might be mentors and equipment, but the connections aren't happening:

Yeah, I think the one difference is you have to be more self-sufficient here. You can't just, you know, pop over to Long and McQuade and get what you need…you really have to have it here, available to you, or you have to make it available to you. So sometimes that creates barriers towards how fast something could be done. Because you have to build in more infrastructure in order to make work or it creates limitations on what you can make. But there also are things that we used to do in Toronto that we haven't been doing so much here that have knowledge and history built into them, that I think that if we were allowed

to have or able to have more access to the artists in the North, then they could get introduced to that. And make use of those resources that we have. We have, you know, 20-some odd loudspeakers here, you know, that are mostly sitting in the basement. So, that's a resource that could be used for our work. So, it's just a question of people knowing how to use them. And so it's just creating a context in which that could happen. So, there's some communication gaps there from lack of proximity.
—Darren Copeland

It is key, as Darren points out, to "create the context" so that sharing resources, lending, and mentorship can happen. This context has to do with institutions of support, such as NAISA, having available equipment and the capacity to teach and mentor, combined with geographical proximity for artists. It is important that it's common knowledge that these resources exist and that they are meaningful and relevant to artists. In turn, artists need to be part of an arts ecology that supports the creation and exhibition of work.

The film and television sector in Northern Ontario has a much more developed media arts ecosystem than other media arts forms. This sector is significantly bolstered by investments and infrastructure available through a range of funders, especially NOHFC. These are supplemented by a robust support system offered in the urban centres (Sudbury, Sault Ste. Marie, North Bay, Timmins, Thunder Bay), including dedicated municipal staffing, tax breaks, and other services. These investments and support dynamics have attracted a large number of films and encouraged the migration of production companies to the region. There have been subsequent benefits to the sector: healthy numbers of support industries along with pre- and post-production facilities and companies (see the case studies on the film industry and Lieann Koivukoski here for examples), film festivals, film networks, labour calls, and industry events such as those organized by CION/Music and Film in Motion in Sudbury. Other media arts have not seen anywhere near this kind of

co-ordinated support or investment. Game developers, influenced by observing the sector's impact, have called for similar investments (see here for more). An ecosystem of creation and production occurs in tandem with investment and institutional support (regulatory, funding, public and private sector); this drives a circular economy.

Darren insightfully noted that geographical distance isn't just about the challenges of connecting with others or difficulties accessing equipment, it's also about how things are intrinsically done in response to conditions or what can be created within the context of these challenges. Significant infrastructure and time is necessary to support creation, mentorship, and resource sharing compared to southern, and urban, communities. These are important nuances that may not be understood by administrators, jurors, and others involved in funding processes. Funding amounts for southern artists or organizations, such as a downtown Toronto arts organization, may not translate into equal and adequate dollar amounts for artists or human resource capacity for organizations who are working from and within rural Northern Ontario communities. For many communities in the North, costs are often higher, and there are fewer other sources of income. The region offers few local council or city grants, the numbers of private and diverse donors is low, and the population and audiences for ticket and art sales is smaller than southern counterparts.

Where there is equipment, there is creation, and where there is creation, there are artists who gain experience and a track record for creative production. Some of these artists become part of a support ecosystem as mentors, advisors and sources of arts information, resources, and inspiration for other artists in their communities or region (for more about mentorship see here). Informal mentorships are particularly important within the context of rural communities because "institutions of support" are very limited; this is compounded by a limited number of northern grantor representatives who would typically support artists with funding proposals, information, and networks (the number of

representatives were further reduced by the Ford government cutbacks to the OAC in 2018/19). There have been some efforts to organize media artists in the region and to attempt resource sharing, and the OAC has promoted the media arts funding programs, but initiatives rarely work unless the local community has the capacity to build and maintain them.

> I know I was really hoping to go to the Film Farm for a residency and just building up more of those technical skills in terms of developing and processing 16mm film because there are all sorts of extra barriers living up here in terms of shipping and access to equipment. I got a LIFT [Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto] membership and wanted to rent the underwater 16mm camera, but it can't leave Toronto, so things like that, finding other ways for the equipment that does exist in the province to move. And I know the OAC did that big regional media arts push a few years ago, but it didn't maintain a presence in that many places.
> —Andrea Pinheiro, *interdisciplinary artist; founder and director, 180 Projects; Chair, Department of Music and Visual Art, Algoma University, Sault Ste. Marie*

David Wilkinson-Simard works with Far North communities; he spoke about some strategies he's been developing through the Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance:

> We're creating tech bundles that will provide lighting, sound, visual recording, a camera. Canon cameras sponsors a tech bundle. There are four tech bundles going out to Northern Ontario, and we're doing training about how to get involved in media arts, how to do lighting, sound stage, all through IPAA [Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance]. We want to be hands off, giving people space to learn. We're the sponsor but allow them to learn at their own pace. We'll do a tour of Northern Ontario

and have a team in place to do their production. There will be a group of panelists. We'd do this process with every community, four tech bundles, do four at a time, in ten communities, and do forty communities by the end.
—David Wilkinson-Simard, *Northern Ontario Regional Coordinator, Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance, Thunder Bay*

The Near North Mobile Media Lab (n2m2l) in North Bay runs its Digital Creator (DC) program that offers programming and equipment on site at libraries and galleries in communities across the North. Historically, the program was focused on youth programming, but over the last two pandemic years (2020–2022) closures of public spaces that house the lab, including libraries and galleries, have hobbled their activities. Regardless, they have consistently been strong supporters and influencers of local clusters and have been referred to often throughout the conversation circles. In 2022 they launched a Digital Creator Online program as a strategy to expand programming for youth in all areas across the North and to respond to the impact of COVID on its regular lab programming.

The DC program has historically been active in the Temiskaming Shores area (New Liskeard, Dymond, and Haileybury), and popular with youth from the area. Dominic Lafontaine, an interdisciplinary artist from Temiskaming First Nation, noted that the DC program had great media arts equipment that could be made more accessible, and observed that there are youth—"diamonds in the rough"—who know a lot more about technology and equipment, such as 3D printing, than many adults. He felt that they could inject knowledge into the labs and assist with inter-generational co-learning. In Sioux Lookout, the lab influenced Jordan Fiddler who found access to opportunities for personal expression, art practice, and connection, particularly as a queer youth, through the use of equipment and space.

The DC program has the most influence and impact in communities that have supporting arts organizations with staffing capacity, but in fact, apart from the cross-region work by DC, there is little organized inter-community or regional activity for media artists. 180 Projects in Sault Ste. Marie, whose main role is to curate media arts and interdisciplinary work, has tried to move beyond a curatorial role and become more active in the media arts (see here), but their capacity as a volunteer artist-run centre is limited and this affects what roles they play or gaps they can fill. One media arts circle discussed access to equipment through local libraries and galleries that collaborate with DC to provide equipment to youth and emerging artists. It was clear from their conversation that the impact and reach of the equipment program has a lot to do with the level of support by the local organization and the staffing of the program.

> The only reason I even know this room existed is because of the photography club. They let us use some of the stuff, sometimes. But that's about it. Yeah, we're not allowed to access it 90% of the time, but sometimes, the guy says, okay, we can use it a little bit. —Anonymous

> Why is there not more access? Why do people hold the keys to these things? That's part of the problem: there's a lot of duplications of services, limitation of services, limitation of access. Sometimes it's just a flat-out lack of existing service in the space, and there are always age limits. As soon as you're out of high school, you've aged out of the services, it's no longer available for you. —Anonymous

The difficulties faced by organizations aiming to develop capacity and increase outreach affect demographic and cultural diversities of expression, networks, and dissemination of art in the region. The lack of organized activity and resource sharing was an important focus in conversations among artists and organizations (and community members) living outside of the formal mandate and geographical reach of DC, which acts as one of the few resources across the region. Their solutions included informal and formal collaborations and resource sharing among other ways to address equipment needs. In Thunder Bay, Sarah Nelson noted the possibilities of establishing digital infrastructure:

> I think this is an opportunity for us to kind of dream big about how we would see a digital infrastructure that would connect artists from different areas. I'm almost picturing…I have equipment for podcasting that I've barely used for a time. So, it could be pooling our resources together, as, you know, people that are engaged in the arts and sharing in those resources, maybe doing trades. I could see that really happening, really organically. Just by having a platform, like you said, that takes the things you like about Instagram and the things you like about TikTok and we have an opportunity here to dream about what that could look like. Does that spark anything for you?
> —Sarah Nelson, *Northwest Lead (Project Manager), CatalystsX, Thunder Bay*

An artist in the northwest made the point that there was a need for an informal online platform that would connect photographers and other artists together, and offer aggregations of events, or news, focused on the arts scene. She felt that the current networks weren't inclusive enough, in terms of sharing across disciplines and across communities, particularly given the variety of ways to virtually connect. In response to the circle facilitator's question about the kinds of connections and support she'd want—artistic or social—the artist responded that she and other people she knows would appreciate having access to equipment that they can test out prior to making an investment, along with opportunities to connect with artists and community for collaborations, photo shoots, and other activities. This would help artists extend the connections beyond their current circuits.

It is challenging for people to try out different art forms because of how expensive it is in the northern communities.
—Anonymous, *Northwestern Ontario*

The same artist shared that it's difficult to get an outside eye on projects, particularly when working from a rural community, when there might not be other artists in your discipline, or available curators or organizations. She'd like to be able to share work-in-progress with others, perhaps on Discord or another online platform, critiques, comments, and other feedback.

To address the varied equipment needs, some advocate for a physical space for equipment lending and sharing other resources and knowledge. Others advocate for a digital space that could provide technical support, centrally house information about equipment, and offer instruction on how to manage an arts-based business or enable ways to connect with other artists (among other supports).

A physical space for borrowing equipment and sharing other resources and knowledge is desirable in some instances, and in others, a digital space could provide both technical support and centrally house information about equipment, managing an arts-based business, a way to connect with other artists, and other supports.

Jonathan Zagula, a videographer and camera operator on Manitoulin Island, envisions an equipment rental space that could double as a networking hub for local filmmakers and other digital artists to reduce the challenges of connecting. He suggested establishing a local media rental centre on Manitoulin Island for which local artists would pay membership fees in order to have access to small scale equipment rentals.

I think equipment's a huge thing, especially because equipment gets outdated so quick. It'd be nice to have a place that's

accessible to Northern Ontario to actually rent stuff from. Not a place for big gear like Whites, but a place to get your DSLRs and little Sonys and little Panasonics and documentary kits. Even if there was a little membership, where you pay a fee for them to upkeep it. I'd be up for that just to have it accessible to me, where you pay a membership fee and then you're able to rent equipment and that's the upkeep that they use towards taking care of that equipment and being able to run that.
—Jonathan Zagula, *filmmaker, M'Chigeeng First Nation, Manitoulin Island*.

While the equipment rental would need to be housed in a physical space, Jonathan was equally eager to have a centralized (either physical or digital) place that could connect him to people looking to hire media professionals, as well as media professionals themselves. Expanding on this idea of a centralized space, Jonathan suggested a digital portal that would provide northern filmmakers with access to practical resources that are often overlooked.

Okay, I'm picking up a project, I need to get a contract together and you log into a portal and you're able to access everything from actor agreements to location agreements, to everything that's for Northern Ontario that acknowledges that it's different from working in the city. —Jonathan Zagula

Jonathan was adamant that freelancing and working in media in Northern Ontario, from the type of work available to the rates and physical locations, is a completely different experience from Southern Ontario (where he grew up and obtained his film studies degree). A tailored digital portal for filmmakers and digital artists working specifically in the North would include an online space for paperwork, rate comparisons, and networking to simplify some of the challenges regarding equitable payment for services and enable clients to have a realistic expectation of the cost of his work. He often struggles to set a

proper rate for his work and justify it to the client. He acknowledged that the lower number of media arts professionals may have an effect on the perceived value of the work he creates. While this is not unique to Northern Ontario, he suggested that it would be helpful to have a space to see what other freelancers were charging and what the going rates were for certain types of projects.

> It's so hard. I can go look at IATSE rates. I can go look at all that and scan through that. But does that apply to Northern Ontario? Can people in Northern Ontario afford IATSE rates?
> —Jonathan Zagula

Ashley Whyte, a visual and media artist from Gore Bay, Manitoulin Island, agreed with Jonathan in terms of a collective space and access to equipment:

> I've contemplated this for years and I feel that the idea of a collective space is becoming a requirement more than just a great thought. An artists' centre or co-op studio would be ideal, a place that can offer space but equipment and internet service as well. So, when we're saying, "Oh, we don't have the camera, we don't have the sound equipment," there are community resources to utilize and fill in the gaps. This last year really punctuated this need for me, because I tend to work from home normally, but now I'm doing everything at home. It would be healthy for our practices, but also for our psychological, spiritual, and emotional well-being to have space that is not our home, where creators can still feel safe and access what they need.
> —Ashley Whyte, *multimedia artist, Gore Bay, Manitoulin Island*

Near North Mobile Media Lab's (n2m2l) lending program works in the ways that Jonathan Zagula and others have suggested a program could work. Based in North Bay, it is a very successful model and attests to the region's demand for equipment. But the expense of shipping to communities across the region (sometimes shipping multiple times to support stages of production) is prohibitive. Weengushk Film Institute (WFI) lends equipment to graduates of its program, but apart from n2m2l, which lends "prosumer"-level equipment, there are no other places to rent entry-level to mid-range equipment in the region. Major film production equipment can be rented from a number of companies with desks in Sudbury, North Bay, and Parry Sound, but this equipment generally ships from Toronto and is not stored in Northern Ontario.

Geography is a significant factor; artists living in urban communities elsewhere in the province have access to artist-run centres, equipment lending programs, and many other supports that are accessible by public transportation. This is not a northern reality. Our conversations revealed that artists in the region would like easier access to equipment, particularly for low-budget and small productions, experimental use, or for projects that might require regular and/or repeated use. This makes shipping and borrowing from urban communities farther afield more difficult. To rent equipment for major productions, Northern Ontario artists experience the same obstacles as filmmakers from urban centres—equipment is rented and travels out of town for shoots.

Game developers navigate similar equipment and technological access issues as other creators, and often, like filmmakers, straddle the lines between commercial and creative production, sometimes because commercial production is the only viable way to create work. Anthony Baumgartner, a game developer and media artist (who was the Kenora Digital Creator program coordinator from January 2020 until April 2020 when the lab was closed as a result of the pandemic) facilitated conversations with game developers in Thunder Bay and other communities across Northern Ontario. (For more on the needs of game developers, see here.) Their conversations disclosed a desire for equipment access and possibly a media hub facility that would also encourage collaborations, growth in the field, and economic stimulation.

A media hub in Thunder Bay would be pretty neat. Having some sort of interactive media hub that will allow people to come in and experiment with extended reality tools, the software or interactive installations or video game production, or whatever....where you could use the equipment and have access to the studio space. That might make a big difference. That could be some sort of incubator where [artists and developers] could try starting their own businesses or do their own freelance or something and collaborate with each other to create. But there also needs to be some sort of mentorship, companies or individuals with experience in the industry [being a part] of that kind of collaboration would be essential, whether it's a membership structure, or [something else]. It could stimulate real economic growth if it was focused on incubating small companies, indie studios, freelancers, and actually create projects that they can promote and sell and turn out, like commercially viable products. That would help stimulate growth and create jobs and build the industry more in the North. I mean, that would be fantastic.

—Orion Atkinson, *Program Coordinator, Interactive Media Development, Confederation College, Thunder Bay*

The idea of a collaborative space with equipment hubs was also generated by the Temiskaming conversation circle. One layered consideration was, organizationally, how to enable technology and equipment learning for users when there isn't capacity for dedicated and trained staff; another was how to reach artists and community members who want more mobility, both for geographical reasons and for project considerations.

Set up locations where there's repositories of equipment, so that people could come in and if they wanted to do any sort of version of a video podcast, that there's an allotment of equipment there: a good camera, a good microphone,

good internet connection. A foundational requirement is good internet. We had this idea of having these spots with equipment. Having some pre-recorded how-to videos—how to use the specific equipment that's at the locations—and then see about having some kind of 1-800 support of sorts, because we all know what it's like to go and try something for the first time. —Drew Gauley, *filmmaker, Temiskaming District*

If you're trying to test out a creative concept or find the right spot for you with your tiny organization or as an independent artist, you can afford to participate. It will act like a library, or it could be also for tech equipment, whether it be green screens, a decent camera, extra sound equipment that could be sort of stored at that hub. If you bring it back late or you don't bring it back in one piece, there's that fee, like a library fine that you would pay to have to have it replaced or to help cover a portion of the cost of its repair. Those within a certain distance would have greater access to these resources than any one group could attain independently. It's geographically distanced sharing so that everyone can partake in it, whether it's an arts organization, or health unit, or anyone in between.

—Chandel Gambles, *Writer, actor, and arts administrator, Temiskaming Shores*

What about a mobile accessory kit, because everybody has a phone, right? But not everybody has all the accessories that can really turn your phone into an amazing portable mobile studio. It could be like a briefcase, you know, you open it up and it's got a microphone with an analogue-to-digital converter and a cage that your phone or your tablet would fit into. There's battery powered lights, there's a small tripod, a monopod, there's mini-sliders. There's a whole bunch of small form factor things you could fit into this accessory kit that people could then use their own phone or their own iPad, whatever. And, you know, sign it out for a week. And get

creative and make your stuff off-site. Because really, there's only so much that you can do in a podcast booth. —Drew Gauley

There can be perceptual and actual barriers in accessing equipment that is housed in local spaces as part of a program, and this can spur alternative programs for community members to access equipment. In the case of Temiskaming, deliberations to establish a podcasting hub were influenced by a perceived lack of access to the DC hub, which was housed at the local library and accessible only by teens. Rebecca Hunt, from the Temiskaming Shores Public Library, pointed out that the DC hub would become both more accessible to a range of youth and others once it was able to reopen post-COVID and was released from the youth-specific focus of its preliminary Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF) funding.

> When the Near North Mobile Media Lab applied for that first grant, they applied through Trillium, and they specified teens, because they were modelling it after a very specific program for teens to get them engaged with being creators using digital media. Now that we are not tied to the Trillium grant anymore we're hoping to open it up to everyone from pre-teens to adults because we did have a lot of younger kids really interested in using the space. It was unfortunate that we had to sort of restrict some age groups from using the space, but that was because of our funding and the program model that they were using. Adults may also want to use the equipment for their own creative purposes. Currently in our space we have two 3D printers, a green screen, filming equipment, virtual reality equipment, and an iMac and two MacBooks. We may need to update our equipment now because it's been a few years, but we do have that equipment set up and available for use. As a public library, we prefer to have the equipment and space open to people of all ages.
> —Rebecca Hunt, *Library CEO, Temiskaming Shores Public Library*

For communities that have access to DC, and for those that don't but need access to equipment, local libraries are often very sensible and accessible avenues for resource sharing and equipment lending. Libraries are becoming very creative with their mandates and the way they reach communities, particularly in the context of COVID. Organizationally, they have available capacity: dedicated staff (albeit often part-time and understaffed), lending systems, and meeting and storage rooms. They are often lively centres, even in the smallest of communities, and are transforming from their traditional lending models to work within an expanded service definition that includes seed sharing and computer loans, as well as space for workshops and other community services.

There is a library or library system in most communities. In some, it is the only location and space for people to access the internet. Reliable internet and services continue to be a barrier for online media arts engagements, digital pivoting, and online collaborations.

> It's the same in places like Cobalt and Haileybury. I mean, I did a webcast in a place where I usually have the extremely high upload speed of two megabytes a second. And we're down to point three nine during the webcast with only 111 broadcasts. And no one else was sucking anything [using internet]. I know this sounds kind of techie and geeky, but I think it would be very practical to have spaces that can guarantee a high upload space for artists to use for anything that is actually live. And that sounds very sector specific, but I think it's broad reaching, the actual impact of that. Because the worst thing I've found for artists, especially artists who aren't familiar with digital media, is for malfunctioning during a joint anything. So, let's just say you've got a live dance thing happening or live musical thing, or live anything, and you've got the comment saying you're breaking up, you're breaking up…that really can throw an artist off. I don't think it's within our grasp to solve the upload crisis for the Northern Ontario, but if we can find a couple locations where we can maximize what people can do,

maybe they can start planning on that.
—John Shymko, *musician, Temagami*

The Schreiber Media Centre provides studio space and audio and video recording equipment to community members in partnership with the Schreiber Public Library. The project began through funding from the Community Journalism Initiative Fund via the Canadian Association of Community Television Users and Stations (CACTUS), which also enabled them to hire a civic journalist. However, after this initial funding period, the centre has to find a way to maintain its programming:

> With the library, we were able to budget equipment…we really didn't need a lot to put it together. It's the maintenance that will be an issue. I'm hoping that this will continue through the library budget and also with the Schreiber Media Centre we'll be looking into fundraising. That's something that we've not been able to do because of just all the COVID issues. And so we will be looking at other grants. We partnered with the Schreiber Senior Centre and the library and both received money for iPads. We were able to distribute those and people can do recordings on that. And also, the senior centre has just applied for a grant for camera equipment as well. We're hoping maybe we can develop a media group or a club through the senior centre. —Donna Mikeluk, *Schreiber Public Library CEO and Schreiber Media Centre Board Director*

Where the DC program has primarily been aimed at teens, the Schreiber Media Centre has largely been adult and older adult driven, in both cases responding to funding criteria and where partnerships and fundraising is possible in the community.

Some interview participants cautioned that accessibility to media resources such as equipment rental facilities will affect whether the equipment is used. In some cases, available media centres or rental facilities may not help creators as effectively as providing them with their own equipment. For instance, Robin Harbron spoke about an incubation program in Thunder Bay that had purchased a multitude of cell phones, likely for mobile development, but their storage location was inconvenient to access.

> They had all these different devices that you could test. But you couldn't ever get there, and they were all obsolete after a year or two. —Robin Harbron, *Thunder Bay*

Obsolescence is a consideration for groups thinking of establishing a rental program. The costs can be quite high when factoring in the initial expense of purchases and the time and expense to maintain and repair equipment, particularly equipment that is more heavily used in rental programs. For high-end gear, like that for film productions, companies tend to rent from professional equipment suppliers that have significant equipment budgets, dedicated staff, and technicians who maintain equipment.

Dustin Goodall, who founded UnSalted Audio, a music recording studio in Sault Ste. Marie, has been in discussions with Algoma University and the Conversatory of Music about collaborating to establish a recording arts program with services to support accessible access to recording equipment and recording studios.[3] He noted that buying and establishing the space for his studio required a great deal of high-end equipment and capital investment. This has been challenging on a number of fronts.

> I think one of the fundamental differences between a space like mine, and a space like 180 [Projects], as an example, is that if you have people using the space at 180, to a large degree, they

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3 As of Winter 2022, no commitment to establish the program has been made by the university.

bring their own media or their own things that they're working on. And it's more about just the physical access to a location to do it in. Whereas in my situation, there's a bunch of electricity involved. And there's a bunch of equipment that can be damaged and, like I was saying to them, some of the only times that I've actually ended up with damaged equipment, because I'm always very careful, is when I've trusted somebody to use the space. They've asked to use a guitar amp and I assume they know how to use a guitar amp, and then I get it back later, and I'm gonna have to do $200 of repair to my vintage Fender amp. And I'm out at a 100 percent loss because I was letting them use the space for free. So, do I start asking them for a couple hundred bucks at that point? So, I think, at least in my position, more of a collective ideal would be a little bit easier to achieve if I could hire another technician who could facilitate things so that it wouldn't end up being me that needs to facilitate everything 16 hours a day. —Dustin Goodall, *owner and founder, UnSalted Audio, Sault Ste. Marie*

In some cases, there is equipment housed in the community but access to it is hampered by prohibitive distances to the studio or equipment rental facility from outlying communities. Another barrier might be that access is limited to a specific audience; this is the case with college and university fine arts programs or film and television programs. As Dustin noted, the challenges also include having enough highly trained volunteers or staff to maintain the equipment, assist with recording, and other technical aspects of a community accessed recording studio.

I've been thinking about the spaces at the university. We have a pretty well outfitted studio, especially for printmaking. And we've just inherited a whole ceramic studio. And it has a photo studio digital lab. If the university will allow us to design a sort of program or point of access for the community, they could enroll in a not-for-credit course, if they would be covered

under insurance for use of the space. That would mostly be for artists who've taken courses already or have degrees from elsewhere or sufficient experience to use the equipment without supervision. But even to manage that sort of program, I would still need part time staff through the university, [but] I don't even have a studio technician this year. So that position could be expanded to kind of facilitate that additional community access. —Andrea Pinheiro

Clearly there are logistical considerations and various parameters (such as funding terms, organizational mandates, or geography) to consider regarding public access to educational system equipment, studios, and technical assistance. Often institutions have liability concerns or integrated resistance to open systems and the adaptation of established administrative and tuition-based protocols. But, as Andrea points out, the equipment is in place, it's often up-to-date, and, in some cases, there is a technician who maintains the studios and equipment, particularly in the larger schools.

I have the privilege of having a good job. If I want the camera, I can go buy one if I need it, whereas lots of other people can't do that but have the ideas for making a film or video work. So, then they're limited to working with their iPhone. I've lent cameras out to students. But one of the other things I'm really trying to find a way to make happen, and it's challenging to figure out how to make it work within the university system, is that I would like to be able to provide access to the studios at the university for members of the public who have sufficient training (alumni, practicing artists, and public workshops), rather than keeping the studios at the university as this closed system. Because we have full darkrooms, a full print and digital studio, a wood shop, and ceramics facilities. Even this term (during COVID) students have been in the studios developing C-41 film and stuff like that. I don't think it would be sustainable to

have 180 [Projects] have an open access studio at present. But I think the university already has so much equipment and more capacity. I think there's a lot of potential and some support, partly because right now our enrollment is so low, but also through our regular collaboration with the city's culture team. Having this access for other community members invigorates the studios and makes it this active community space that is more desirable for students to be in. To me, that just seems like one of the best solutions. —Andrea Pinheiro

Small user fees might offset additional tech support and blanket liability insurance could be expanded to cover public access. Within the context of small cities and small arts programs, it does make sense to share resources and build university/community relationships. With educational programs suffering from low enrollment, community access to studios, flexible programs, and general interest workshops and classes might increase student enrollment into regular programs. Educational institutions can benefit from being open systems and acting as "institutions of support" for local and regional arts organizations and artists. Artmaking in both spheres is mutually reinforcing. (For more about community/university relations and the influence of fine arts programs, see here).

Studio access and equipment lending programs might work well for artists within a close distance to these spaces, but as Corey King noted:

> If we're regionally diffused, people aren't going to drive all the way to [a larger town] to pick up a VR headset. And in fact, I always like these initiatives to get equipment into people's hands and companies always say that they want equipment. But I've seen [companies] get volumetric studios and all kinds of [equipment] but they fail due to the tragedy of the commons, due to it's not there when you actually need it. Somewhere, there's some dusty [stuff] that's not being used [and] it costs

hundreds of thousands of dollars, which is why I would rather give people the money [and] let them buy the headset. You can create barriers by offering things in a way that doesn't actually address the total problem. I am definitely still pro equipment [loaning], I'm just concerned about it not being a giant waste of money and only being accessible to people in [larger towns]. And can somebody dev on a computer for only two weeks then [return it] like a library book and then get it back out again? Does that work for people's workflows? I'm not even sure.
> —Corey King, *Chief Executive Artist and co-owner, ZenFri, Winnipeg*

However, there are few equipment purchase grants and loans available for artists. Some game developers and filmmakers have accessed financing or small grants through business programs, like FedNor, or via their local Community Futures Development Corporation (CFDC). But these sorts of funding resources are limited. Formally incorporated media arts non-profit organizations and film production companies are eligible for equipment grants through NOHFC and Cultural Spaces (for a more detailed case study of the northern Ontario film industry, see here.) This makes it challenging for small ad hoc collectives and artist-run groups to purchase, house, maintain equipment, and manage equipment lending.

Alternatively, game developer Brendan Lehman shared the possibility of making equipment rentals and media workshops accessible to dispersed communities through an equipment vehicle and travelling workshop service. This idea is similar to North Bay's n2m2l. Since 2006, n2m2l has been using a retrofitted mobile home vehicle to bring production equipment, editing suites, and workshops to isolated towns and project sites. A similar service or program could also support low- to no-broadband communities and offer training for and experience with digital media arts equipment and technology.

Where there might not be capacity for on-the-ground collaborations and networks or where hybrid virtual/hands-on strategies are desired, workshops and professional development can help build the capacity of individual artists and the media arts ecosystem.

> The level of open-source software these days is absolutely incredible. It rivals, if not exceeds, the professional software. I certainly don't mind teaching people, to teach a lot of the applications. There are digital audio workstations that are easily as good as Pro Tools. There's editing software, video editing software, that's easily as good as Adobe Premiere. And if we can supply a list of what I've come across, that is pretty fantastic. And I think it might be a good idea to be offering training in these because it will allow artists to spend their money on things that are more related to their arts rather than tools that open-source communities have provided for free.
> —John Shymko

Throughout our conversations, there have been overlapping ideas and solutions regarding equipment access and use, sector differences, the need to develop stronger community resources, information platforms, and links between organizations and systems of support for artists. It is clear that communities in the North know what is needed for bolstering and sustaining a viable arts sector. However, a combination of semi-responsive (but not consistent) funding options and constraints, insufficient access and learning supports, geographical differences and shifting technologies, among other things, affect sustainability, consistency, and diversity within media arts practices. Chandel Gambles, who is supportive of a digital media centre, spoke to the formation of a network that connects resources and information. She noted that what has actually developed is an overlap of services and a lack of communication between organizations, which has led to communities "constantly reworking the wheel."

Dominic [Lafontaine] mentioned the use of the digital media hub site[4] and the list of free resources which I recall coming across at one point and being so excited that so much information was in one spot. It'd be helpful to actually have a known resource and listings location that all Northern Ontario people can access to get digital information or find out who the other people with resources are, to share resources with. We don't know where. We don't know where each other are and so a networking central location for this information to sit within would be so helpful because it feels like we're constantly reworking the wheel. Even in these conversations, right? We're having this conversation over here. But *Pat the Dog*[5] is having their conversation slightly down the road. If we have a spot that's all about networking and being able to get everyone branched off where they need to go, that digital communication would certainly help folks link up both to other people and to the information they need at a faster, more efficient rate. Then we can all be focused on creation and industry advancement rather than always independently searching to overcome basic, but widely shared challenges, alone in our own communities. —Chandel Gambles

Members of a North Bay circle, facilitated by Jaymie Lathem, proposed a centralized open-source toolkit or resource bank to address similar issues of knowledge sharing, access to information, and sector support. Their ideas echoed those we heard in other circles. All tended to agree that the platform needed to be open and accessible, low maintenance, flexible, and not "owned" by a single organization or group (although some circles noted they'd like local iterations of these kinds of platforms). Some suggested using a platform like Discord that had

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4   Digital Creator at the Temiskaming Shores Public Library.
5   Pat the Dog Theatre Creation, a Kitchener-Waterloo based company that works in collaboration with Sudbury's PlaySmelter Festival, hosted a virtual conversation over the winter of 2020 to discuss touring for theatre companies across the region.

multiple administrators and options for dedicated servers and that could house information and resources as well as provide the open, chat functions for connecting with others and posting calls, invitations, and other activities.

What these conversations suggest:

Media arts practices need equipment: Artists need up-to-date equipment and access to institutions of support to be able to address linked, but less obvious, needs such as training, mentorship, and equipment rentals. The arts sector is layered and artists and communities need funding and integral elements at each layer for it to flourish.

Our research conversations and investigations into forms of infrastructure access revealed a lack of equipment or the availability of only outdated equipment, a lack of training options, and an absence of repair businesses. Artists regularly work with outdated or rudimentary equipment (like using a phone to create videos). This affects their ability to show professional quality work for funding applications and in a variety of professional spaces, such as exhibitions, digital platforms, or other opportunities. Professional work requires professional tools, unless an artist has designed as part of a project the use of outdated/rudimentary equipment. The equipment and training needs are affecting the presentation of professional art. Granting agencies need to consider the availability of equipment and infrastructure when reviewing grant applications. Northern resilience or make-do resourcefulness does not translate into funding dollars; resource availability is a serious consideration that granting agencies overlook. Southern counterparts are not subject to the same lack of resources.

One solution is to consider that, while arts council funders are limited in their mandates to allow capital purchases to unincorporated entities (equipment is a public asset), innovative and creative adjustments could support and build on the capacity of existing equipment programs. This would assist with collaborations with organizations who have capacity to support programs and artists, such as new collectives, libraries, and other long-term and emergent organizations, now and in the future.

Institutions of support: Colleges, universities, film production programs, libraries, and other existing institutions might creatively explore what kinds of community/institutional collaborations would contribute to professional development for artists in the public realm and, simultaneously, bolster institutional programs and aims. While many of the artist-run centres and arts organizations in the region are struggling with capacity, both financial and in staffing, expanding services to enable equipment lending services through a volunteer-run program and/or small membership fees could offer opportunities that benefit the organizations and the community, including enabling equipment-lending through training and support and other forms of artist development. The success of expanding services would enable greater organizational capacity, ideally in increased human resources and funding opportunities; this would also increase possibilities of different types of programming.

Clusters of influence: As we have seen around the region and throughout the conversations, there are a number of local factors (besides funding) that contribute to the development of professional, contemporary arts practices. These factors often manifest in clusters: common characteristics include the presence of professional artists who have paved the way for others and become mentors; the existence of institutions of support (formal and informal); access to appropriate technology; forms of training to learn how to use the equipment; training and exposure to myriad aspects that make up a professional arts career (analogue, virtual, and hybrid); and diverse spaces to exhibit and disseminate work (digital, analogue, and hybrid).

Equipment grants: Artists need seed funding for equipment, along with access to flexible, accessible (both virtual and analogue) professional development and technical support to diversify creative development in the region. The OAC could, for example, institute small equipment budgets for Northern Ontario artists (akin to the CCA's $1,000 equipment grants), particularly those who can't easily access equipment lending programs. The CCA might allow larger equipment purchase amounts to address higher needs and reduced access to equipment by artists in rural and isolated communities.

Increased flexibility in definitions: Tight definitions of what constitutes an artistic or commercial practice limits artists. However, fluidity in definitions would allow some artists the ability and choice, if they have a diverse portfolio, to access business grants or artistic ones. High costs for equipment purchases and rentals for media practices in the region generally requires artists to focus on commercial production. Business grants might create more flexibility for independent artists to apply for loans and grants, if they are considered in a similar way as non-profits: they contribute to the local economy and community development, but don't necessarily generate the kinds of profits, or profit projections, that business programs typically look for in a business grant application.

Hybrid approaches and community level solutions: No single organization can address the needs of Northern Ontario artists and communities—there is no generic approach. For example, some artists need equipment to be readily accessible on a day-to-day basis. This might translate into better economies if the artist owns, rather than rents, the equipment. Others might benefit artistically and economically in renting equipment, but it is necessary that the rental program is timely and accessible financially and geographically. Some artists want collaboration and the camaraderie of a shared space or co-owned equipment. Collective ownership can work where

there are the right numbers of artists and the capacity to purchase and maintain equipment. For some, who can access small cities and communities across the region, a more formally organized space with a member-based rental program might be effective. For others, bringing the equipment and training to communities can be a means to introduce artists to technology and to allow for one-off projects. Most artists need technical support and training at various stages of their projects or careers, but they want this in different ways: in-person, virtual workshops, distance or in-person mentorship, and/or virtual repositories with pre-recorded training workshops and advice that is relevant to northern artists. We need to support a range of responses that support all artists to make creative work in their own communities.

Meaningful and community directed resource sharing: There is a need to focus on collaborations and cooperative responses to gaps, to pay attention to relationship building and capacity, and ensure that any structure (whether formal or informal, cooperative or collaborative) is directed by the local community. Recognizing the needs of marginalized groups, youth, and emerging and professional artists is also important to ensure the project is accessible and relevant. Collaborations and cooperatives might work well for entry-level and prosumer-level equipment needs. Informal collaborations could be encouraged between artist groups that can manage their technological needs together and share the equipment and repair costs collectively.

Equipment lending programs: Participants contributed a number of options regarding equipment programs, and there are likely others that make sense for each community and context. Key considerations are access to storage space, administrative capacity, and financial capacity to purchase and maintain equipment. Some of the suggested strategies include:

- Expansion of an existing equipment loan program with an existing organization rather than creating a new organization

and establishing a local advisory and/or coordinating committee/organizer.

- Working with film schools, libraries, and/or Digital Creator to establish lending programs and access to technicians.
- Creating small local collectives (formal or informal) to co-purchase and share equipment between members, encouraging this when there is a critical mass to reduce expenses but not so many members that equipment is not available when needed.
- Co-applying for training grants to provide training and mentorship for local artists.
- Establishing new organizations or lending programs where long-term capacity exists (human resources, space, administrative capacity).
- Contacting film companies and production studios—there are a number across the region, in the urban centres (Sault Ste. Marie, Thunder Bay, Timmins, Sudbury, and North Bay) to see if there might be options to purchase used equipment, rent production space, mentor, and/or expand their equipment to allow for rentals.

Resources: Conversation circles noted additional needs for organizations and individuals, already at capacity, that should be considered or provisioned by funders, municipal councils, and other institutional bodies:

Administrative and funding resources:

- Access to templates, information, research, and frameworks relevant to small and medium-sized Northern Ontario communities.
- Tips and pathways to "ask" for funding from local foundations, municipal councils, and/or city staff, along with action plans and tools to develop local, sustainable funding, including education campaigns.

- How to address funders with queries and pitches as well as how to analyze information on sector impact, and other resources that help organizations make the case for arts impact.
- Training/sessions regarding ways to research, develop, manage, and sustain innovative partnerships/collaborations, particularly between differently established groups (such as between large and small organizations, incorporated and ad hoc collectives, northern groups and organizations from Southern Ontario and elsewhere, Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups, or rural and urban). Standard documents often assume equity between partner organizations without addressing potential differential power relations, needs, and approaches.
- Tutorials and other information regarding digital tools and requirements, such as for podcasting.

Software, hardware and equipment resources:

- Easily accessible links for vetted software, online tutorials, and other resources to limit online overload and ease the challenge of finding relevant sources.
- Equipment and software workshops offered by northerners.
- Equipment lending, swaps, sharing, and training.

Artistic and business of the arts resources:

- Sample contracts for film production, design, and other work.
- Calls for proposals and other opportunities.
- Ways for artists and arts administrators to connect, find talent, and post about activities, productions, or call for resources and support.
- Administrative tools and tips.
- Office equipment swaps.

Equipment and Tech: Existing resources:

Near North Mobile Media Lab has an equipment rental program and will ship to artists throughout the region.

Digital Creator North provides space through libraries, museums, and galleries in six communities (Elliot Lake, Kenora, Temiskaming Shores, Timmins, Sioux Lookout, and Sault Ste. Marie). These will reopen in conjunction with the province's COVID protocols. These programs have historically been aimed at youth and emerging artists, but expansion of the mandate is possible and would enable the program to offer more responsibility and provide better service to the communities. The program provides access to a range of media equipment, peer-to-peer learning, and support and training by an on-site experienced media artist. Digital Creator North is establishing a virtual lab to increase accessibility to programming given the context of COVID and the geographical limitations in the region.

Community channel in Sault Ste. Marie: The local community channel in Sault Ste. Marie has equipment and can support artists to create short works toward the channel's commitment to seeking and airing local content. (For more on the Sault Ste. Marie film case study and training and mentoring, see here.)

Funders such as the CCA now enable the purchase of $1,000 in equipment in project budgets. The OAC's Indigenous Visual Arts Materials Program (IVAM) allows for $500 or $1,000 purchases of small tools and equipment and/or other materials for arts and craft production.

CatalystsX and the Northern Lights Collaborative Project helps to reduce social isolation of youth in the North. They provide funding and/or connections to funding opportunities, workshops and other resources to youth ages 15 to 35.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, STRATEGIES, DIRECTIONS + OPPORTUNITIES

Jonathan Tyrrell, *Sounding Bodies: Eutopia* (2021). Steel roofing panels, sound transducers, aluminum stands, and steel pipe. 10 x 1 x 7 in. Curator: Darren Copeland, New Adventures in Sound Art (South River).

What these conversations suggest:

The suggestions, directions, strategies and recommendations found throughout the report are gathered here. To learn more about the experiences that informed this thinking, visit the relevant chapter.

VALIDATION + VISIBILITY IN DIGITAL CIRCUITS

Reorienting the gaze through the digital: Northern organizations, curators, and artists are finding ways to attract international audiences and shift the gaze from the South to the North, through creative, curated, and strategic use of digital spaces. These curated approaches circumvent typical and dominant routes to dissemination, presentation, and validation of work; they build profile through different networks. Strategic projects by northern groups and curators, supported by existing and targeted funding, can help build stronger visibility for the region; these could include virtual exhibitions, collaborative submissions to international exhibitions, fairs, and venues; critical writing about northern artists and exhibitions; and curated screenings on recognized digital platforms like VUCAVU.

Micro and regional audiences: The goal to achieve national recognition and audiences can translate into missed opportunities to recognize, connect, and cultivate and disseminate work to the individuals and communities in the North who could comprise a significant audience. Building circulation through local festivals, galleries, libraries, and other venues could bring visibility, higher audience numbers, and potential income to filmmakers and other artists. In addition to festival circuits, there is a need to advocate for Cineplex and other franchises, along with the independent cinemas, to be more open to screening regional and domestic productions.

Funding challenges for independent and small film productions: Small productions and independent filmmakers struggle with production grant requirements asking for screening numbers, audience numbers, and income generated through these screenings. They also struggle to gain access to the festival circuit in Canada and are subsequently ineligible for funding from Telefilm Canada and Ontario Creates. This, in turn, eliminates their eligibility for matched funding through Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation (NOHFC) grants. Funders need to examine these gaps and challenges and identify strategies to support independent filmmakers and create scaffolds to help filmmakers apply for funding opportunities.

North–South partnerships: Inequity and misunderstandings about the nuanced complexities of the region continue to affect collaborations and partnerships. While the Ontario Arts Council, and its Northern Arts Projects program, specifically, leans on the experience of northern jury members to discern the depth of relationships to northern communities outlined by southern-based organizations, many juries (particularly at the national level) may not have this level of awareness. Targeted jury membership, increased awareness, and close assessment would be helpful. In addition, organizations, particularly small groups and ad hoc collectives that are already under-capacity, need to recognize their own expertise and establish equitable relations with southern or out-of-region partners. Funding programs that support out-of-region companies tour or participate in collaborations and presentations in the North should require fair and equitable recompense to northern hosts and collaborators. They could consider preliminary funding that enables stronger relationships building and stronger processes.

ALEXANDER RONDEAU—BETWEEN PHEASANTS CONTEMPORARY: NAVIGATING SCALES VIA THE DIGITAL

- Alexander Rondeau, and therefore BPC, has the capacity to exhibit work that can navigate a range of co-articulating spheres—cross-geographical, digital, rural, urban, and queer—and influence contemporary practices in the region. He has a range of experiences that contributes to his influence: working with the Near North Mobile Media Lab, opportunities to curate shows with them, formal training and critical practice, access to a wide audience (developed through these experiences), and an ability to translate these experiences to that audience. Galleries and other media arts organizations need to support emerging curators to explore their curatorial language, build their capacity in physical and digital ways, and expand their networks. This support is particularly important for contemporary, queer, and other marginalized curators and artists in the region.

- Independent curators and cultural workers in Northern Ontario need different forms of support to access research, international residencies, audience and market development, and touring funding at the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Council for the Arts. A starting point could be an initial series of projects that include mentorship by organizations who have established touring and market development activities.

- Through these funding programs, it is possible for curators working in remote regions to access international art fairs, market their events, be present at festivals and other spaces and also for festivals and other spaces to present Northern Ontario artists. This bypasses gatekeepers and the other obstacles to accessing institutions in southern Canada. BPC illustrates the interest in local and regionally specific art practices and their connection to networks of global artists.

- Organizations might explore opportunities for emerging curators and artists to work with, and participate in, residencies at artist-run centres in Northern Ontario. Similarly, this should be extended to residencies and galleries outside the region to help emerging contemporary curators develop relationships and potentially curate or co-curate shows. This could include inter-gallery exchanges of curators and exhibitions to build contemporary media arts practices in the region.

- Curators and galleries might explore establishing a range of hybrid and non-traditional spaces for exhibiting work and learn how to engage with digital platforms as a relevant method for establishing meaningful relationships with artists and curators at regional, provincial, national, and international scales.

- Galleries, curators, and media arts organizations might consider applying for funding to employ writers for professional reviews of contemporary work in the region. This would increase the profile of exhibited and emerging work, as well as develop or enhance critical conversations.

- There are no post-graduate programs in Northern Ontario (and considering that attending art school out of the region may not be possible or desirable), very little northern-focused critical work, and very little coverage of Northern Ontario artists in digital and print magazines. There is a need for non-traditional forums for engaging in critical/contemporary thinking, such as conferences and other symposia, critical writing in a range of print and online media, and conversations, exhibitions and presentations using digital platforms. Northern artist-run

centres, collectives, and other organizations could act as conduits for these forms of dissemination and conversations.

- Local arts councils, municipal arts funders, and economic development agencies need to consider and expand eligibility for residencies, alternative exhibition spaces, and digitally established market development.

- Media arts organizations and funders need to explore ways to support emerging, ad hoc and alternative spaces and curators.

SIOUX LOOKOUT: MINWAAJIMO, TELL A GOOD STORY

Institutions of support: An ecosystem is required to support the continued and meaningful development of media arts practices and careers, such as spaces (virtual and physical) to exhibit; platforms to disseminate work; mentorship and training options; and administrative and technical capacity. One strategy is to nest within an existing organization where strong relationships exist or can be developed, but the nested organization retains control and direction over their work, activities, and governance. In remote and rural communities where there may not be other arts organizations, collaborations with non-arts organizations may prove to be advantageous. These include health organizations, women's centres, Friendship Centres, schools, and libraries.

Models: Models, approaches, and systems need to shift so that they are responsive and relevant to local contexts and communities. They need to be flexible and accommodate both virtual and physical/on-the-ground strategies and they need to be directed and controlled by the community, not by an outside entity.

Physical spaces: The need and desire for physical spaces is a repeated request, yet there are few individual artists and existing arts organizations that have the capacity for this level of management. Further study is necessary to determine the complexities of funding models and governance models, project administration, direction, and control, and the accommodation and flexibility of projects given shifting needs and capacity over time.

Mentorship is an important aspect of professional development in the region; when available, it often leads to collaborations and the development of new work. Very few formal mentorships exist, and informal mentors rarely receive remuneration for their support, training, and advice.

Micro grants help get money and materials into the hands of artists and are intended to help artists begin to develop a funding/funder relationship. The numbers, however, demonstrate that few artists are transitioning from micro grants to regular program streams. The micro grants are typically for visual arts materials and do not encompass the media arts. When artists have strong mentors, they have increased numbers of works created, funding success, and more achievements over the long term. These findings indicate that it may be worth considering media arts–specific micro grants for materials, cash for small projects, and mentorship. Mentorship and mutual support are demonstrably effective. There are clearly positive impacts; we need to find ways to support informal and formal mentorship. The expansion of Indigenous Visual Arts Materials grants to include media, and/or the creation of micro media grants will need strategic investments and additional supports (outreach, stable infrastructure, mentorship) to help artists transition into regular media arts funding streams, which includes supporting media arts infrastructure (galleries, artist-run centres, networks, and so on).

Circuits of visibility: Curated screenings through recognized platforms like VUCAVU are good strategies for collectives and other groups of filmmakers to increase their visibility. This is particularly cogent for curators and for distributors who have connections to festivals, television networks, and other streaming platforms. These curated presentations on VUCAVU and other reputable platforms help independent filmmakers reach wider audiences, circumvent dominant access points, and help build professional credibility.

HYBRID SPACES: DIGITAL + ANALOGUE STRATEGIES

Hybrid, fluid and integrated spaces: Throughout our conversations with artists and organizations we heard about the adoption of fluid arts practices that adapt easily between analogue and digital spaces. No single model can accommodate all artists, all practices, and all approaches. Programs, projects and funding need to recognize this fluidity and design flexibility into definitions and program development.

Maximizing the capacity of spaces (and artists): Both analogue (on the ground) and digitally mediated online spaces address different needs for artists. In many cases, digital methods can draw audiences to local spaces, and vice-versa. The most successful artists, and their projects, are care full; they curate projects using digital methods and connect them to physical spaces.

Training and mentorship: Many artists noted struggles with technology, platforms, and how to disseminate their work and build their profiles online. Targeted training, mentorship, and funding to help northern artists develop strategic, curated approaches are needed to help artists navigate digital platforms. It is important to ensure that a range of approaches are available for disabled artists, digitally isolated artists, and for artists with lived experience of mental health and addictions; this will enable strategies that are meaningful, appropriate, safe, and culturally relevant. Given the dominance of digital methods, and particular platforms, artists need support in order to apply sophisticated approaches when using these tools.

Visibility: Digital methods provide different avenues and audiences for artists and organizations; some organizations and artists have developed sophisticated approaches to reaching these audiences and increasing their visibility. Critical writing, curated exhibitions and other care full strategies can help establish northern artists and their work, but currently there are few avenues to publish critical writing. Many artists struggle to gain the necessary capacity and knowledge to build online exhibitions: curated support by arts organizations is important for building an arts practice, but many organizations in the region are overcapacity and cannot offer this service effectively.

Infrastructure: In addition to mentorship, institutions of support that navigate between analogue and digital spaces are needed in the region. These institutions need support to build their capacity. The current digital infrastructure is inequitable and not available or is consistently unreliable in all communities.

NEW ADVENTURES IN SOUND ART (NAISA): SOUNDING OUT DIGITAL + ANALOGUE SPACES

Hybridity: As we've observed in other conversations, a thoughtful approach to virtual/digital and on-the-ground/analogue platforms and programming are important for organizations and artists to reach different audiences. In the case of NAISA, virtual programming enabled them to reconnect with an international audience that had previously connected in-person. Similarly, knowing the audiences, particularly within the context of disseminating contemporary, experimental, as well as lesser known, or more technical practices, can inform how to scaffold and layer different entry points for audiences.

Visibility and validity: The local and international reach of NAISA demonstrates that high calibre work and artists engaged in experimental and contemporary practices can find audiences and validation in, and from small, rural communities in Northern Ontario. While NAISA brought its audience with it to South River, their audience was very international, despite programming happening on the ground in Toronto prior to their move north. While NAISA and its curatorial programming is known within contemporary sound art and media circuits, their work and that of other organizations and artists in the region would benefit from expanded visibility that would come from critical writing about artists and arts practices in the region. Funders might consider developing targeted project funding to support exhibition reviews and other critical writing along with new publications and strategies to encourage existing publications to profile northern and rural artists.

Digital infrastructure and geography: As it is with many Northern Ontario communities, broadband connectivity is an issue in South River (despite being a southern Northern Ontario community). Rural organizations and artists must deal with the extra costs (financial and human resources) that physical distances between communities entails— shipping, equipment rental, travel for exhibitions, training, financial, and other activities. Geography will always be a challenge, and until major infrastructure projects are undertaken to expand internet access in communities, funders might consider these additional costs to northern organizations and artists and provide additional and/or targeted funding to address these issues.

Capacity and the media arts ecosystem: NAISA's capacity to engage audiences and mentor artists and other organizations in the region has a great deal to do with their professional capacity (gained over many years as skilled curators, organizers, and administrators) along with organizational capacity that comes with operating funding from both the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council.

The importance of institutions of support, like NAISA, and the support of them, cannot be overstated. Many of the artists we spoke with and several arts organizations have benefitted from and been influenced by NAISA's work, opportunities to exhibit, and mentorship from artistic director Darren Copeland. NAISA and other Northern Ontario–based organizations have pointed to a need for nuanced understanding of the unique challenges faced by northern organizations, and have made requests to amend, adapt, and further open operating funding and other programs to both incorporated and unincorporated organizations. Strategic investment in northern media arts organizations to build capacity, professional development and mentorship programs, and explore systems for equipment and other resources sharing would help expand the media arts ecosystem as well as creation and dissemination in the region. Organizations struggle to scale up (into digital programming, with capital projects, and with human resources), and we have noted a range of perceptions and understanding about how to navigate the system, available resources, and the eligibility requirements of various funding programs (project, operating, and capital funds). MANO is the only media arts ASO that has some reach into the region, but also has limited capacity (with part-time staff). There are organizations that help with capital projects and builds, but we've learned that existing models don't fit all organizations, all of the time, and in many contexts of the region. Arts councils and funding agencies might explore how to better support organizations in the region through outreach, strategic mentorship programs, targeted ASO and project funding, and addressing gaps and needs in operating programs for both incorporated and unincorporated organizations.

ART FIX OF NIPISSING: LIVED EXPERIENCES WITH DIGITAL + ANALOGUE SPACES

Hybridity: As we've highlighted elsewhere in this report, Art Fix, like other organizations, has found that while the digital is ubiquitous and has created many opportunities to reach different audiences and adapt local and analogue programming, digital practices do not reach all audiences all of the time. In addition, there are particular sets of relations and complexities for artists with lived experiences of mental health and addictions.

Capacity: Pivoting to digital forums and forms requires careful thought in terms of formats and approaches. Similarly, transitioning to digital platforms and an online presence isn't a reproduction of existing programs in an online fashion. Programs must be carefully re/designed, facilitated, and filmed and reproduced with an eye for quality and accessibility. Digital pivots require additional creative, technical, and coordination skills. As Art Fix and other organizations adopt hybrid forms, their capacity to deliver high-quality programming using analogue methods and digital platforms becomes an issue. These programming complexities and capacity issues highlight pre-existing and entrenched issues that ad hoc collectives face. There is a need for resources such as funding and technical, administrative and creative skill sharing to support digital and hybrid programming. Funding agencies need to examine ways to support established collectives without requiring the scaling up and formalization typically required for operational funding.

Collaborations and nesting: Art Fix's administrative relationship with White Water Gallery (North Bay) and the scaling project with Workman Arts (Toronto) has enabled them to have a degree of stability and administrative capacity. However, in the long term, there are significant questions to grapple with regarding organizational structure and eligibility for funding. As a northern group, however,

they find there is a certain element of translation that occurs between their experience and funding program criteria, and between them and established, incorporated organizations, particularly those from Southern Ontario that may or may not understand the complexities of the organization, their methods of delivering programs, and the region and their membership. The North, in its collaborations with the South, have often had the responsibility of managing the relationships and helping southern organizations navigate the complexities, but without the benefit of increased capacity. In the case of Art Fix and Mindful Makers (two of the Workman Arts Scaling Project sites), there is a need for new sources of funding to support their capacity at the end of the project.

SAFE + ACCESSIBLE SPACES IN DIGITAL PRACTICES

Digital strategies: Digital platforms, technologies, and tools, through access to via broadband and the internet, have enabled many artists to adapt their practices and participate more equitably across conventional forms of dissemination and relationship building such as gallery exhibitions, artist talks, conferences, mentoring, and collaborations. However, simply creating access to these tools does not address the nuanced and varying needs that emerge from the internet infrastructure. These include the capacity to use the tools (and know where to find them), the ability to endure long digital and virtual engagements, online facilitation, safety, confidentiality, and other issues. As we've seen throughout the report, one model, or a single strategy, cannot address all artists or all communities.

Hybridity: The changing and diverse needs of deaf and disabled artists requires funders to be flexible and accommodating. There is a need to activate both digital and on-the-ground/in-person spaces, both of which require different kinds of access, technology, and skills. Working in different spaces and at different scales is necessary to navigate lived experiences as artists and to engage within a complex arts ecosystem

that is active at a range of levels. Similarly, no single model works for all artists at all times.

Institutions of support: Marginalized artists, disabled artists, and artists with lived experience of mental health and addiction are affected by galleries, curators, ad hoc and established organizations, and other groups involved in fostering a strong digital arts ecosystem. Targeted support from ASOs, funders, and other agencies could help artists build their capacity and participate fully as media artists. This would close some of the current holes not addressed by institutions of support.

Specific strategies and considerations noted by artists:

- **Resources**: Develop resources for deaf and disabled artists and artists with lived experience, such as supported mentors/advocates/supporters. Ideally, artists and cultural workers with lived experience of mental health and addiction could help artists navigate technology, funding programs, and other technical, creative, and administrative elements. Pilot funding might assess the approaches and impact of strategic resources.

- **Funding and funder flexibility and support**: Increase funder outreach and supports for artists with lived experience of mental health and addiction. One artist noted the flexibility of the Deaf and Disabled funding program at the Ontario Arts Council (OAC), and encouraged funders to integrate flexibility into deadlines, application processes, eligible activities, and changes in activities over the time of a grant to reflect the changing and diverse needs of deaf and disabled artists. It was noted that the funding programs and outreach at the OAC was diminished as a result of the 2018 cuts to the OAC by the Ford government; additional funding for these funding streams and outreach teams are necessary to provide equitable funding for deaf and disabled artists and artists with lived experience of mental health and addiction.

FILM, TELEVISION, + GAME PRODUCTION IN NORTHERN ONTARIO: A VIEW OF THE FIELD

To build a sustainable Northern Ontario film sector and support the production of northern stories that contribute to creative, cultural, and economic impacts, we need to implement a staged approach. It is important to note that through this research project we spoke with many northern filmmakers, producers, and others who typically have less influence in decisions and strategies developed in the region. The conversation circles, interviews with a variety of northern stakeholders, and research into the sector offer the following recommendations:

1. **Funders and potential investors might examine practical and systemic questions to understand how to invest strategically:**

- What kinds of jobs are being created? Low-level crew positions or highly skilled talent?
- What kinds of history and relationships do these companies have with communities and the industry?
- Does the proposal have strength and do people support it?
- Does the company have a real investment in the region or is it a shadow company, data storage house, or other peripheral site?
- What percentage of the film's income stays in the North? What is the distribution of funding and the economic spin off?
- Will the project use northern production teams or northern post-production companies?
- Will these investments build internal talent and self-reliance in Northern Ontario?
- How are we supporting the transition of students and emerging talent into the film industry and the transition of early career filmmakers and talent into more senior and more responsible roles over the long term?

- Do our current strategies and investments help to tell Northern Ontario stories by Northern Ontario talent?

Diversity of stories and storytellers

- Establish strategic and sustained investment into northern-owned and controlled companies and the production of northern stories by northern writers, directors, and producers to build a northern media ecosystem that energizes and benefits the sector and region into the future.
- Support the develop of "small" stories and productions.
- Small productions with local meaning will have traction/income and not be so dependent on North American/global markets.
- Design targeted and strategic programs to support independent filmmakers and Indigenous and female-identifying filmmakers and producers. These strategies might be cross-regional or community specific (geographical, Indigenous, and/or gender-based).
- Require out of region production companies to produce a certain percentage of stories by northerners and to support, through varying avenues such as co-productions, financial support, equipment lending, or long-term mentorship, northern talent development (e.g., producers and directors).
  - Hire and support the development of post-production talent in the North.
  - Require or provide extra credit to external production companies that share their equipment with, and support, emerging filmmakers, independents, and northern production companies.
  - Offer mentorship for independent and emerging filmmakers as a condition of funding facilities.
- Adapt funding models to provide entry and intermediate level funding. Re-assess distribution and sales requirements for independent films.

Highly skilled technicians and creative talent

- Expand funding for training and mentoring to develop northern talent, particularly highly skilled technicians and creative talent (writers, directors, producers, and actors). This would enable a viable, stable, and continuous film industry.
- Provide both on-the-ground and virtual mentorship and training for emerging filmmakers.
- Support both on-the-job and long-term informal and formal mentorships with grants and mentor training programs.

Dissemination circuits and visibility

- Pilot a regional distribution circuit/s through existing and emerging networks (including festivals, libraries, and community television) and expand the role of major broadcasters and theatres toward screening northern productions. This could reduce the limited reach and reliance on southern festivals and theaters, create opportunities for larger audiences, and increase distribution sales. Initiatives like these would help build a stronger northern media arts, film, and television ecosystem.
- Build visibility of northern film through a strategic fund that enables critical review and writing about northern film productions.

Northern capacity

- Diversify investment strategies to scaffold multiple trajectories within the film sector. Target particular areas identified by stakeholders from Northern Ontario. Funders and funding recipients should be encouraged, and possibly required, to invest in communities, northern productions, northern creative talent, and support cross-sector and community relationships.
- Replace the current service economy model and bolster the community driven economic and cultural systems that already exist. Strategically invest in, and support, the emergence of

northern owned and controlled companies. Examine the circulations of investments.

- Ensure mentorship, capacity building, and sector capacity building activities do not count as one of the three artistic grants allowed per year at the Ontario Arts Council.
- A percentage of the large production company film revenues might be redirected toward northern capacity development.
- Address access and financing issues for Indigenous producers.
- Create funding programs that support training, equipment purchases and lending, equipment co-ops, and other resource sharing.
- Support projects with differences in deadlines (e.g., long term/ fast).
- Consider shifts in funding allocations: What would independent and northern film production look like if NOHFC was the first-through-the-gate funder for small Northern Ontario production companies?

SAULT STE. MARIE FILM + FILM FESTIVALS

Ecosystem / Institutions of Support: Institutions of support are critical to local media arts infrastructure. These conversations, and the data, demonstrate that the current artistic media arts infrastructure is limited and under-capacity; the challenges for Indigenous, disabled artists, and artists with lived experiences of mental health and addictions are much more pronounced. Strategic investments and programs to support the development of northern artistic productions and the career development of independent and other media artists are required to support the northern media arts ecosystem and address historical disparities. The SSM film companies are motivated to work together to build the sector and explore ways to build the local talent pool. Collaborations with the city, local film festivals, with schools, the local

community channel, and with local independent filmmakers can contribute to a more accessible and viable media arts ecosystem in SSM.

Marginalized and disabled media artists: Funders, other institutions of support, and production companies might further examine their systems and eligibility requirements to respond in more nuanced ways to the challenges faced by disabled media artists. Reviewing and amending funding protocols would enable greater access to funding and full participation in a range of roles on film productions.

Funding: The NOHFC (as noted [here](#)) could address disparity and the creation of northern content by reviewing some of its programs and establishing northern story and northern creative talent requirements. Dollars awarded in the North are not equal in effect.[1] At the arts councils, targeted outreach and support to increase applications to programs, along with strategic and supplemental funding to address contextual inequities, could help bolster the sector in the region. Although funding typically is equitable percentage wise (based on population), there are additional costs and resource demands in the region in combination with fewer alternatives sources of income.

Hybrid digital/analogue approaches: There are complex relations between digital and analogue/on-the-ground experiences. The SSM film festivals reach different audiences through different spaces and platforms, and they are aware that filmmakers benefit from the direct experience of participating in festivals that offer more than film screenings. Workshops, training sessions, networking, and other professional development opportunities build a different kind of energy and engagement than a purely digital festival. Similarly, making films requires on-the-ground production, which is why the pandemic so

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1   The OAC has also shared aggregate statistics for the period 2018-2020, demonstrating that 3% of applications to the program were northern applicants to the Media Arts program, and these applicants received 6% of the awarded grants. Similarly, these applicants requested 4% of the funding and were awarded 7%.

dramatically affected the film industry and the current demand for independent film to fill the gaps when larger productions were not being produced during this time.

GAME ARTS IN NORTHERN ONTARIO

A range of strategies for individual designers and developers, institutions of support, and networks to help build a robust game development community in Northern Ontario:

- Examine and design an investment and seed strategy to help build a game development environment that supports new organizational development, equipment access, research and creation, formal and informal training and mentorship, and networking.
  - Strategies could include local multimedia development centres and/or mobile labs that host equipment, mentorship, or knowledge resources in order to incubate new freelance or indie media development companies.
- Boost the industry positively in a similar way to the film industry by offering economic incentives (e.g., better tax credits and property rates) and granting programs to help establish game studios and produce games in Northern Ontario.
- Develop dedicated work opportunities for game development.
- Develop a recognized network to connect locals and spread the news of opportunities, events, and support options.
- Establish a Discord channel for Northern Ontario game developers and designers. The process to establish a moderator/s and codes of conduct can help build foundational relationships to explore more capacity-heavy initiatives.
- Establish one or more official online Northern Ontario game development collectives to connect towns that are too small to host a game development community and create one or more recognized and safe online networks across Northern Ontario.
- Host, co-host, partner, establish new, and build on existing game development events such as game jams, conferences, and social events focused on bringing game developers together to participate in discussions or to work on collaborative projects.
- Develop game development volunteer and internship opportunities.
- Collaborate, partner, and connect with reputable organizations and industry professionals and with established sectors and faculties such as libraries and universities to host events and to create reliable contacts.
- Create professional game development knowledge resources and support programs and provide access to game developers.
- Provide local access to industry-standard equipment and software, whether through affordable memberships, equipment loaning programs, or equipment donations, and provide equipment funding that enables local game development.
- Establish relationships and support from reputable local or international media related organizations such as the International Game Developers Association (IDGA), Game Arts International Network (GAIN), and the Media Arts Network of Ontario (MANO).

PODCASTING, BROADCASTING + COMMUNITY RADIO: LOCALLY CONTROLLED MEDIA + CREATION

Hyperlocal: Activating hyperlocal spaces is an effective podcasting and radio strategy for some communities, as a way to provide culturally relevant, community-focused content creation and curation. Simultaneously, this hyperlocal focus defines a particular audience, even if the station is streaming digitally and can be accessed farther afield than a community radio frequency. Podcasters addressing broad

social issues, and reaching broad audiences by streaming online, are also sometimes taking what might be called a hyperlocal approach, by focusing on how complex social issues are experienced within a particular community.

Hybrid approaches: Podcasting and broadcasting can contribute to community engagement and community building, and cultural knowledge transfer. These are powerful, accessible tools for investigative journalism. What many people note, however, is that these digital tools cannot entirely replace on-the-ground/analogue experiences in the community. Language learning, cultural transfer, performance, and other cultural activities need direct human to human, land-based and/or location specific sharing which are the primary platforms from which digital podcasting and radio emerge. And, when shifting into, or using digital platforms, care must be taken in the dissemination and protection of cultural knowledge.

Importance of curated content and locally produced content: The dominance of centralized, corporate broadcasting delivery has dramatically shifted the dynamics of community-based content creation, community building, cultural animation, and talent building (both artistic and technical) that formerly were stimulated by cable channels, community radio and television stations. Similarly, audience attention has shifted with the prevalence of major streaming platforms and access to other digital spaces beyond the radius of a community frequency. It's not clear how, or if, that kind of energy and participation can be achieved through podcasting and community radio. Most participants, however, are excited about the possibilities of podcasting: its accessibility, relatively low tech and equipment requirements, and capacity to reach audiences on a number of scales. It is clear that curated platforms are important in their capacity to carve out audiences within the scope of the internet. Strategic investments are needed to support community podcasting, radio, and documentary production—with

equipment, training, and funding to support wages for both creation and administration.

Capacity: Most participants appreciate the openness of podcasting and community radio which not only allows, but encourages "citizen participation," but emerging and non-professional podcasters need support to learn how to podcast. Similarly, although it's clear that podcasting platforms are important channels to support individual podcasts and podcasters and can provide targeted support for emerging podcasters (as Makonse Media hopes to do), the capacity to do this work may not be there. There is a need for avenues for non-professional, emerging and professional content creators, and platform providers, to have support: in making and disseminating their work, learning the trade, and engendering a new generation of content creators, particularly those from marginalized, Indigenous and BIPOC communities. Micro grants for laptops, microphones and earphones, podcasting workshops, website development, social media marketing and other dissemination strategies would help build a strong podcasting ecosystem in the region. For instance, the *Storykeepers* podcast launched in 2021 by Waubgeshig Rice (Wasauksing First Nation) and Jennifer David (Chapleau Cree First Nation) received support through an Ontario Arts Council Indigenous Arts Projects grant to build their website, hire a graphic designer to design the logo and to commission a musician to create the podcast theme song. Generally, however, most granting programs do not allow for these kinds of project expenses nor do they fund web or podcast series, which makes it difficult for emerging podcasts to receive funding. Podcasters may need to explore other ways to support their podcasts, such as through fundraising campaigns, or if they can make a business case, through economic development funds.

Podcasts with a creative spin, or that focus on arts and culture, may have some success applying for arts funding for discreet projects rather than a long-term series, and may have some success with program streams

like the OAC Audience and Market Development fund. Arts funders might consider expanding program funding to accommodate arts-based podcasts, such as *Storykeepers*, or podcasts created to provide augmented creative experiences for listeners. While Heritage Canada funding for the Community Journalism Initiative has injected energy into local broadcasting and spread into creative applications, the fund does not cover the administrative costs associated with launching and managing a program. This substantial responsibility falls on already underfunded and under-capacity local organizations. To support a viable and long-term ecosystem of creative podcasting, storytelling, and local journalism, the LJI program might consider expanding resources and funding to cover infrastructure costs, expand the length of the funding, and explore how to support organizations to transition the program, post-funding; in addition, added flexibility regarding the definition of journalism, and allowing the hire of collaborative or collective teams, could boost the impact of the podcasting and journalism in the region.

BORDERLINE RADIO: PODCASTING FROM THE HYPER-LOCAL

- A targeted and curated digital platform can create increased opportunities for audiences to find local artists, even if initially local artists by local audiences.

- Local ownership of digital platforms ensures that the local is visible. Local ownership has community connections that tend to promote local talent and build reciprocal ecosystems; large broadcasting companies do not have the same community relationships or commitments to prioritize the local.

- As we've learned elsewhere, there are complex relations between the local and the digital. Local and regional circulations can gain additional traction through digital exposure.

- As more artists turn to the digital platforms or online audiences, particularly podcasting, as a way to build audiences and to share their experiences, work, and stories that aren't covered elsewhere, it may be beneficial for a range of support to be considered. These include training and mentorship programs, micro-grants from local municipalities, expansion of eligibility by economic development corporations, and the recognition of podcasting as an important audience development tool within arts council funding programs.

DOKIS FIRST NATION: KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER ON THE GROUND + IN THE DIGITAL

Capacity: There is a need for community radio and podcasting development and infrastructure, not only for communities north of the 55th parallel, but for those that have limited broadband. Reliable broadband is a critical need for many communities, even within the southern borders of Northern Ontario.

Being Care-full: Being respectful when sharing stories (sharing is a gift) is central to how, when, and where stories are disseminated. Control of the dissemination needs to be in the hands of Indigenous communities and the storytellers themselves. Digital strategies and digital storytelling have many nuances for communities to consider.

Hybrid approaches: Digital strategies, particularly podcasting and the sharing of cultural content through recordings, virtual tours, and online workshops are particularly relevant to Dokis Band members, but they are also very adamant that digital strategies cannot replicate, or completely replace, in-person engagements. The digital can enhance or provide access to in-person engagements in a different way. Critically, there are cultural and spiritual aspects that cannot and should

not be shared in digital spaces, particularly given the ease of digital dissemination.

Strategies: Funding programs are needed to support the piloting of podcasting and community radio stations, including training and mentorship, equipment purchases, coordination, and infrastructure. While the Local Journalism Initiative is available to communities, the funding doesn't have the flexibility to support collective efforts and part-time or pilot projects; it also doesn't fund the costs for a local community to host and develop a project.

For further resources and funding to support Indigenous broadcasting and podcasting, see the resources section here.

ECOSYSTEMS OF SUPPORT: ORGANIZATIONS, ORGANIZING + COLLABORATIONS

Institutions of support/clusters: The research conversations conducted for this report, and data collected and analyzed from the CCA and OAC granting agencies, support the fact that the development and growth of media clusters are strongly related to the presence of institutions of support and sustainable funding in communities and across the region. It is also clear that institutions of support and funding are dispersed inequitably throughout the region. Strategic funding is required to support in-depth and meaningful conversations, research, and strategy development to explore how to build capacity and infrastructure. While the issues are complex and responses may need to be applied in different ways to parts of the region, what is clear is that the funding "numbers" do not account for a chronic lack of resources and substantially differing expenses for northern artists and organizations. The realities in Northern Ontario do not seem to be considered when allocating funding and considering how "far" the funding goes toward projects in the North. This includes

the "in-kind" support that local resource networks provide to southern counterparts, and the absence (or overdrawn capacity) of those valued resources in Northern Ontario.

Mentorship and nesting: It is important to investigate organizational relationships and nesting and institutional mentorship more deeply to determine what structures, approaches, and supports can be most effective in supporting informal/unincorporated groups to build capacity outside of core funding and to build a stronger media arts ecosystem in the region. It is equally important to recognize benchmarks and shifts in organizational relationships over time and to reassess supports and needs.

Decentralization and networked approaches: It is important to focus on "nimble magpies"—the animators of networks who act as functioning liaisons between networks within communities or sectors. They provide an essential service that links artists and organizations and communities and should have access to financial support, with training, to continue to build a robust media arts sector in the North. They underpin networks and act as "people-as-infrastructure," animators within communities who are turned to and often work informally, beyond capacity and without support in advisory and liaison roles on behalf of the creative sector. The sorts of advice and guidance includes how to navigate the funding sector, capacity building, professional development, networking, organizing, and building visibility.

Calls for decentralized approaches and for local juries to vet applications (particularly in remote communities) does not signal a need to dismantle the jury process at the arts councils or any existing ASOs. It indicates a need for scaffolding and advocates for outreach and access for existing programs and organizations.

Definitions and funding eligibility: Organizations and individual artists are calling on funding agencies to revisit the eligibility

requirements of all programs, and for operating funding programs to be more flexible and inclusive of well-established ad hoc groups and collectives that demonstrate artistic merit and impact.

Pilots and strategic funding: Dedicated and strategic funding programs to help build organizational infrastructure in the region is necessary as a result of Compass and the lack of programs that support capacity building, networking, and sector development in the region. Provincial government cuts to the OAC eliminated the funding for arts service projects and the necessary support it provided to the region. One suggested method for repositioning and providing funding support may emerge if funders (OAC/CCA) convened gatherings, or provide targeted funding for, gatherings with representatives from emerging and ad hoc collectives (e.g., cover the costs and co-ordination expenses and ensure that communities define the parameters of the gatherings). In addition, funders could expand micro-grant eligibility, such as IVAM, to include media arts related expenses and consider instigating new micro-grants that can contribute to building the media arts ecosystem. Bolstering the arts ecosystem in Northern Ontario would be further aided by the following: building media arts organizational capacity; building the profile of mid-career and established artists (and strong emerging artists) through funding for critical writing and review of exhibitions; and supporting exhibitions, screenings, and other forms of digital dissemination.

The community liaison, or nimble "magpie" may be worth considering as a pilot with combined funding from the OAC, CCA, NOHFC, provincial Art Service Organizations, and possibly local Community Future Development Corporations. This would help evaluate the efficacy of an expanded presence in the region and applications into the programs and contribute to capacity building of artists and organizations through assistance navigating the funding environment. Targeted pilots could explore expanded and additional micro-granting and local jury processes.

ANDREA PINHEIRO—180 PROJECTS: NAVIGATING CAPACITY + CARE-FULL CURATION

- Hybrid artistic and organizational practices that activate both analogue/on-the-ground and digital/virtual spaces enable new and possibly fruitful collaborations that might increase administrative and creative capacity for organizing, creation, presentation, and dissemination of art in the region.
- Collaborations that are responsive to regional and community contexts and that have fluidity in terms of support and direction, may be more fruitful than formal organizations.
- Across the region, we have seen that there are key individuals who influence the development of the arts sector. Their relationships to other curators and artists across the region, the country and internationally are influential to the kinds of relationships other local artists make, and the kind of work being created.
- Andrea Pinhiero has financial leeway which has allowed her to provide a free gallery space for 180 Projects and Algoma University, given her full time position at the university. However, like other leaders and volunteers, organizational capacity is extremely limited; as a volunteer, she must balance out her professional obligations at the university. 180 Projects' recent decision, somewhat compelled by the pandemic, to explore digital platforms, virtual collaborations and other hybrid activations more broadly, has been constrained due to limited funding options and significant human resource gaps.
- Funders need to recognize the valuable role of ad hoc collectives and volunteer-run groups; funders and ASOS might explore how to support collectives in the region with greater capacity, higher resources, and support (advise, mentorship, guidance) to navigate structural, governance, incorporation, and granting processes.

- City level granting has been crucial for 180 Projects; the more capacity an organization has, the more it contributes to its local community. Across the North, however, only the urban centres provide consistent arts funding to organizations (a few cities, such as Sault Ste. Marie, have recently expanded granting to individuals). Rural townships and township networks, economic development offices, and community futures organizations need to invest in artist-run centres, collectives, organizations, artists, and artistic leadership through micro-grants, loans, seed funding, training programs, resource sharing, and donation structures. Critical infrastructure—reliable broadband and access to low-cost spaces—are also necessary.
- Ad hoc collectives, particularly those without the challenge of a physical space, are flexible, nimble, and responsive to the community and emerging disciplinary and interdisciplinary practices and conversations. They are connected to the people, conversations, and arts circuits, rather than to formal spaces. Support for these groups to maintain this kind of flexibility and responsiveness, within both an ad hoc structure and incorporated governance model, is needed.

FORMAL TRAINING: EDUCATION ECOSYSTEMS

Diversity of training from the North: The conversations with artists point to the need for a range of northern-based educational and creative opportunities for young, emerging, and professional artists and curators. These would be informal and include digital, hybrid, and on-site options, and provide links to networks, including additional educational offerings, educational and artistic mentorship, and exhibition/curatorial opportunities. These components would support a critical/contemporary, diverse media arts ecosystem; it would be controlled and accessed from the North. A decentralized range of educational opportunities would enable artists, curators, and arts administrators to learn from their home communities.

Curated conversations: There is need and interest for conversations about contemporary arts practices and for sustained critical practices in colleges and universities. Curators, gallerists, and educators in academic institutions might collaborate on colloquia, artist talks, and other curated events. Funding programs that can support these engagements include the Northern Arts program at the OAC and Creating, Knowing and Sharing at the CCA.

Arts Education at Schools of Education: We repeatedly learned about the impact of individual teachers on students and the arts community at large and how the loss of a particularly motivated teacher could often mean the end of an arts program. These kinds of school-community circuits are common. There may be opportunities for curators, artists, and galleries to work with the three schools of education in Northern Ontario (Nipissing University, Laurentian University, and Lakehead University) to build greater knowledge about the media arts sector in the region, such as contemporary media arts practices and artists, so that graduates bring this knowledge and these connections with them into their teaching.

INFORMAL MENTORSHIP + TRAINING ECOSYSTEMS

Hybrid digital/analogue methods: Artists and organizations need hybrid and highly local (and networked local) responses to their mentorship and training needs. While digital technologies and online platforms are enabling artists to create work and disseminate it online, artists often note that at various points in their careers they need in-person training and access to learning—such as when working with new material, equipment, or technology or developing a set of necessary

skills. On-going mentorship helps build and maintain momentum and connection, whereas training occurs at specific stages.

Training: There are many highly experienced media arts administrators and media artists with a range of skills in Northern Ontario, yet there continues to be a tendency for northern artists to consider southern artists and urban centres as central locations for professional artists and training. While it can be beneficial to learn a skill or gain knowledge from someone with expertise who lives outside the region, especially if knowledge of that skill is unavailable, accessing knowledge from mentors in northern Ontario helps to build capacity within the region. It is necessary to shift the "gaze" from the urban south as a centre. Seeking training or mentorship locally or regionally establishes an informal infrastructure of knowledge and expertise which can continue to be shared, Ultimately, it contributes to a regional media arts ecosystem.

Local and regional symposia, conferences, gatherings, and other events are important: they gather artists together to engage with critical issues in contemporary art, build connections, enable and promote relevant contextual and cultural knowledge exchange in terms of regional practices, and are important aspects of raising the profile of contemporary practices. HRSDC and others might consider establishing training programs for cultural workers and offering arts-based technical skills development such as arts administration. Graduates could be supported with ways to access contracts and work across the region. This might be achieved through a database or a digital platform that connects organizations, independent artists, galleries, and trained workers.

Funder outreach and support: We frequently heard from artists and organizations that they would benefit from more robust and consistent support from funding agencies to provide information about grants, help navigate the process, and provide guidance on applications.

Artists in the northeast referenced the loss of the OAC Northeastern representative. As there are no organizations in the region with the mandate to build capacity for artists and organizations, there is a gap in this kind of professional development (some local arts councils have hosted presentations by the OAC, but typically don't provide grant writing support).

Individual artist mentoring: Mentoring is a vital element for media artists to learn and develop the artistic and technical aspects of their discipline as well as the professional aspects of managing the business aspects of their career. While there are a few formal opportunities for mentorship through the NOHFC program (film mentorships and the regular internship program), a great deal of informal, and generally unpaid, mentorship occurs in the region. This has mixed success due to the capacity of the mentor (mentorship skills and time). Artists note a number of important aspects of informal mentoring in contrast to formal training: informal training allows responsiveness to context, such as the changing and emerging needs of the artist during a project and as a career over time, and it can be responsive to distances, particularly within the current digital environment. Mentorships deepen the media arts ecosystem, and often result in collaborations between emerging artists and more established ones.

Organizational mentoring: The role of mentorship for other emerging or unincorporated and ad hoc media arts organizations is overlooked but important. Mentorship and "nesting" help organizations as they build toward establishing an incorporated entity, if that is the desired direction. It can provide shadow support to ad hoc media organizations and enable them to deliver their programming. Small organizations (incorporated or not) are ineligible for operating/core funding with the OAC and CCA. Extremely limited options for applying for operating funding are a direct result of the elimination of the Arts Service Projects and Compass grants at the OAC (post–Ford government cuts). There is a cascade effect: the only funding

opportunities with the OAC for operating funding is the Northern Arts Projects program, which is increasingly under pressure to meet the demands of other programs that were reduced, closed, or otherwise highly subscribed. While the host organization can potentially offset the costs of administrative functions (such as accounting and reporting) using a small fee incorporated into the project grants, the regular project grants at the OAC have little room to support costs above and beyond direct project expenses.

The NOHFC internship program is one avenue for organizations to hire newly graduated students, but the program is not accessible for many organizations because of a mix of requirements that tend to exclude, rather than promote, internships. These requirements do not broadly accommodate northern contexts. For example, an organization must have a full-time supervisor, a full-time office, and typically, a contribution of nearly $6,000. Organizations with strong operating budgets can more easily handle this expense, whereas small organizations without operating funding and small budgets cannot manage hiring an intern but may have highly skilled staff who can mentor. In addition, as the program only supports newly graduated students, not self-taught or emerging artists, organizations cannot hire artists within the field that could benefit from the internship experience. While NOHFC expanded the program criteria to allow people outside of the region to be hired (as a result of organizations having trouble finding a pool of recent graduates within the required field), this leaves behind a pool of northern people who don't have formal training. In addition, the internship program only allows a single year internship and doesn't allow repeat hires for the same position; this means that mentors and supervisors spend a great deal of time onboarding and training an intern before they are really ready to take on responsibilities within the organization. The ineligibility to re-hire interns for similar positions means that organizations have to constantly restructure, or design, new projects; they are unable to deepen their mentoring and training capacity within a particular skill set.

Connecting mentors and mentees: Artists noted that both formal and informal mentoring is inconsistent, and that people often don't know who in the region has the skills and capacity to mentor. Mentorship needs to be long-term, well matched, responsive, and flexible to distance (virtual). There is a need for higher visibility of artists and their work; there is a parallel need to link people, and opportunities, together. This could be informally done via a Facebook group, a Discord channel, or more formally, through an organization in the region with a simple database of experienced arts administrators, coaches, mentors, and artists who can offer artists a range of skills.

Mentorship needs to develop responsibility. Mentees must have ownership over the direction of the training. Many mentorship and training programs need to not only fill needs for lower-level skills (such as tech crews in the film industry), but also support artistic development and direction set by the mentee.

NOHFC strategies:
- Allow organizations with a strong history of programming and evidence of administrative capacity to apply (both formally incorporated and unincorporate applicants).
- Allow ad hoc and incorporated organizations to share an intern in order to increase the flexibility of the program.
- Enable the employment of demonstrably talented people from the region, who would benefit from an internship, whether formally trained/graduated or not.
- Allow a re-hire into similar positions so that institutions of support become skilled at training for particular positions (such as arts administration, curatorial, arts education, or communications).
- Allow mentorships of varying durations, such as months or years; enable part-time mentorships to allow for leveraging and training; and allow for flexibility in the scope of the mentorship, as defined by the needs of the applicant.

- Expand the film mentorship program to allow other professional media artists to mentor artists (game arts, independent filmmakers, curators).
- Expand the program to allow intra-organizational mentorship and nesting to build arts administration capacity with the sector, which would mean mentorship of existing staff and volunteers within organizations.
- Adapt the required financial contribution so that the program is more accessible to smaller organizations. For instance, one strategy might be a sliding scale, or percent maximum of the annual operating budget.
- Consider maintaining a database of experienced arts administrators, coaches, mentors, and artists with a range of skills.
- Consider providing coaching and mentoring training, at no cost to mentors, to increase the proficiency of the mentors and the success of the internship program.
- For all internships and mentorships, ensure that applications include opportunities for meaningful training, with increased responsibilities (aligned with capacity) throughout the mentorship. Specifically, for film, ensure meaningful mentorships and include positions that help build the talent pool in the region toward the production and creation of northern stories. These include directing, producing, and camera—not only crew positions that support satellite companies. In addition, establish a weighted system with points for northern•owned companies and a diversity of positions.

Further research: Further research is needed to understand, more deeply, the role, impact, and process of informal and peer-to-peer mentorship along with formal opportunities in the region.

EQUIPMENT, TECH + RESOURCE SHARING: DIGITAL CONNECTIONS

Media arts practices need equipment: Artists need up-to-date equipment and access to institutions of support to be able to address linked, but less obvious, needs such as training, mentorship, and equipment rentals. The arts sector is layered and artists and communities need funding and integral elements at each layer for it to flourish.

Our research conversations and investigations into forms of infrastructure access revealed a lack of equipment or the availability of only outdated equipment, a lack of training options, and an absence of repair businesses. Artists regularly work with outdated or rudimentary equipment (like using a phone to create videos). This affects their ability to show professional quality work for funding applications and in a variety of professional spaces, such as exhibitions, digital platforms, or other opportunities. Professional work requires professional tools, unless an artist has designed as part of a project the use of outdated/rudimentary equipment. The equipment and training needs are affecting the presentation of professional art. Granting agencies need to consider the availability of equipment and infrastructure when reviewing grant applications. Northern resilience or make-do resourcefulness does not translate into funding dollars; resource availability is a serious consideration that granting agencies overlook. Southern counterparts are not subject to the same lack of resources.

One solution is to consider that, while arts council funders are limited in their mandates to allow capital purchases to unincorporated entities (equipment is a public asset), innovative and creative adjustments could support and build on the capacity of existing equipment programs. This would assist with collaborations with organizations who have capacity to support programs and artists, such as new collectives, libraries, and other long-term and emergent organizations, now and in the future.

Institutions of support: Colleges, universities, film production programs, libraries, and other existing institutions might creatively explore what kinds of community/institutional collaborations would contribute to professional development for artists in the public realm and, simultaneously, bolster institutional programs and aims. While many of the artist-run centres and arts organizations in the region are struggling with capacity, both financial and in staffing, expanding services to enable equipment lending services through a volunteer-run program and/or small membership fees could offer opportunities that benefit the organizations and the community, including enabling equipment-lending through training and support and other forms of artist development. The success of expanding services would enable greater organizational capacity, ideally in increased human resources and funding opportunities; this would also increase possibilities of different types of programming.

Clusters of influence: As we have seen around the region and throughout the conversations, there are a number of local factors (besides funding) that contribute to the development of professional, contemporary arts practices. These factors often manifest in clusters: common characteristics include the presence of professional artists who have paved the way for others and become mentors; the existence of institutions of support (formal and informal); access to appropriate technology; forms of training to learn how to use the equipment; training and exposure to myriad aspects that make up a professional arts career (analogue, virtual, and hybrid); and diverse spaces to exhibit and disseminate work (digital, analogue, and hybrid).

Equipment grants: Artists need seed funding for equipment, along with access to flexible, accessible (both virtual and analogue) professional development and technical support to diversify creative development in the region. The OAC could, for example, institute small equipment budgets for Northern Ontario artists (akin to the CCA's

$1,000 equipment grants), particularly those who can't easily access equipment lending programs. The CCA might allow larger equipment purchase amounts to address higher needs and reduced access to equipment by artists in rural and isolated communities.

Increased flexibility in definitions: Tight definitions of what constitutes an artistic or commercial practice limits artists. However, fluidity in definitions would allow some artists the ability and choice, if they have a diverse portfolio, to access business grants or artistic ones. High costs for equipment purchases and rentals for media practices in the region generally requires artists to focus on commercial production. Business grants might create more flexibility for independent artists to apply for loans and grants, if they are considered in a similar way as non-profits: they contribute to the local economy and community development, but don't necessarily generate the kinds of profits, or profit projections, that business programs typically look for in a business grant application.

Hybrid approaches and community level solutions: No single organization can address the needs of Northern Ontario artists and communities—there is no generic approach. For example, some artists need equipment to be readily accessible on a day-to-day basis. This might translate into better economies if the artist owns, rather than rents, the equipment. Others might benefit artistically and economically in renting equipment, but it is necessary that the rental program is timely and accessible financially and geographically. Some artists want collaboration and the camaraderie of a shared space or co-owned equipment. Collective ownership can work where there are the right numbers of artists and the capacity to purchase and maintain equipment. For some, who can access small cities and communities across the region, a more formally organized space with a member-based rental program might be effective. For others, bringing the equipment and training to communities can be a means

to introduce artists to technology and to allow for one-off projects. Most artists need technical support and training at various stages of their projects or careers, but they want this in different ways: in-person, virtual workshops, distance or in-person mentorship, and/or virtual repositories with pre-recorded training workshops and advice that is relevant to northern artists. We need to support a range of responses that support all artists to make creative work in their own communities.

Meaningful and community directed resource sharing: There is a need to focus on collaborations and cooperative responses to gaps, to pay attention to relationship building and capacity, and ensure that any structure (whether formal or informal, cooperative or collaborative) is directed by the local community. Recognizing the needs of marginalized groups, youth, and emerging and professional artists is also important to ensure the project is accessible and relevant. Collaborations and cooperatives might work well for entry-level and prosumer-level equipment needs. Informal collaborations could be encouraged between artist groups that can manage their technological needs together and share the equipment and repair costs collectively.

Equipment lending programs: Participants contributed a number of options regarding equipment programs, and there are likely others that make sense for each community and context. Key considerations are access to storage space, administrative capacity, and financial capacity to purchase and maintain equipment. Some of the suggested strategies include:

- Expansion of an existing equipment loan program with an existing organization rather than creating a new organization and establishing a local advisory and/or coordinating committee/organizer.
- Working with film schools, libraries, and/or Digital Creator to establish lending programs and access to technicians.

- Creating small local collectives (formal or informal) to co-purchase and share equipment between members, encouraging this when there is a critical mass to reduce expenses but not so many members that equipment is not available when needed.
- Co-applying for training grants to provide training and mentorship for local artists.
- Establishing new organizations or lending programs where long-term capacity exists (human resources, space, administrative capacity).
- Contacting film companies and production studios—there are a number across the region, in the urban centres (Sault Ste. Marie, Thunder Bay, Timmins, Sudbury, and North Bay) to see if there might be options to purchase used equipment, rent production space, mentor, and/or expand their equipment to allow for rentals.

Resources: Conversation circles noted additional needs for organizations and individuals, already at capacity, that should be considered or provisioned by funders, municipal councils, and other institutional bodies:

Administrative and funding resources:
- Access to templates, information, research, and frameworks relevant to small and medium-sized Northern Ontario communities.
- Tips and pathways to "ask" for funding from local foundations, municipal councils, and/or city staff, along with action plans and tools to develop local, sustainable funding, including education campaigns.
- How to address funders with queries and pitches as well as how to analyze information on sector impact, and other resources that help organizations make the case for arts impact.
- Training/sessions regarding ways to research, develop, manage, and sustain innovative partnerships/collaborations, particularly

between differently established groups (such as between large and small organizations, incorporated and ad hoc collectives, northern groups and organizations from Southern Ontario and elsewhere, Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups, or rural and urban). Standard documents often assume equity between partner organizations without addressing potential differential power relations, needs, and approaches.

- Tutorials and other information regarding digital tools and requirements, such as for podcasting.

Software, hardware and equipment resources:
- Easily accessible links for vetted software, online tutorials, and other resources to limit online overload and ease the challenge of finding relevant sources.
- Equipment and software workshops offered by northerners.
- Equipment lending, swaps, sharing, and training.

Artistic and business of the arts resources:
- Sample contracts for film production, design, and other work.
- Calls for proposals and other opportunities.
- Ways for artists and arts administrators to connect, find talent, and post about activities, productions, or call for resources and support.
- Administrative tools and tips.
- Office equipment swaps.

Michel Dumont, *Venus of Superior* (2016). Installation.

APPENDICES

- DATA METHODOLOGY
- REFERENCES + RESOURCES
- PROJECT ARCHIVE
- ART FIX REPORT

RAyme, *RAYRAYRISING* (2019). Acrylic, 16 x 20.

APPENDIX 1 - METHODOLOGY[1]

We compared funding allocations over a three-year period from two government agencies—the Ontario Arts Council (OAC) and the Canadian Council for the Arts (CCA)—to determine if there is a difference in funding support for artists and arts organizations in Northern Ontario (N ON) and Southern Ontario (S ON).

Data Quality

Reporting of Northern Ontario population statistics varied whereas those data for Southern Ontario and Ontario were reported consistently. To resolve which population statistics to use for Northern Ontario, the difference between Southern Ontario and all Ontario was used as a benchmark and the reported value for Northern Ontario population that was closest to this difference was considered the most accurate.

Indigenous population statistics for the North are reported to be inaccurate due to varying participation levels from First Nation communities and difficulties in capturing on- and off-reserve numbers. The reported values for Indigenous populations for Northern Ontario (using StatsCan) could not be reconciled accurately with the difference between all Ontario and Southern Ontario. The difference between the Indigenous population of all Ontario and Southern Ontario was used for Indigenous population data points.

Data generated for Northern and Southern Ontario in this report should be considered "indicators" but not be used as definitive until more precise numbers are reported.

Data Processing

Data is the result of four merged databases from publicly available grant reporting data for three consecutive fiscal years: 2017–2018, 2018–2019, 2019–2020. The OAC represented three data files while the CCA represented one data file.

- Data was converted and each was processed and organized for analysis.
- Relevant fields in OAC and CCA data were mapped and merged, eight columns (fields).
- Regional definitions used standard geospatial boundaries for Northern and Southern Ontario.

Analysis

- Evaluation was based on visuals and charts displaying data behaviour.
- Pivot tables were employed to automate the use of aggregated data.
- The process had several iterations of creating tables and charts, submitted with recommendations, until specific charts were determined as key.
- This iterative process was critical for data quality as erroneous and outlying data was identified and reassessed for accuracy.

Combined OAC/CCA Data

Data cleaning and transformation is iterative and integrative to reduce errors. Common tasks include record matching, identifying inaccuracy of data, overall quality of existing data, deduplication, and harmonizing syntax and contraction of text strings where possible.

Two data sets were merged using eight shared data points:

Fiscal Year:	yy-yy
Funding Organization:	OAC, CCA
Recipient Name:	Last Name, First Name, Organization Name
Type:	Individual, Organization, Group

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[1] Stephen Fox-Radoulovich analyzed the open-source data from the CCA and the OAC and provided this short account of his methodology.

Type of Funding:	Project, Individual, Prizes and Fellowship
Amount:	Accounting Data 0.00 CAD
Recipient City:	City Name
Region:	N ON, S ON (Northern Ontario and Southern Ontario respectively)

APPENDIX 2 - RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

(Note that resources with hyperlinks will not be visible or available with a printed version of the report.)

Regional Film networks
Northern Ontario Talent for Film (Facebook group) – 5.3K users
Sault Ste. Marie Film Community (Facebook group) – 3K users

Northern Ontario Film Festivals
Cinéfest Sudbury
Festivals of the Mind, Sault Ste. Marie, and its two offshoots: Reel Northern Flicks (shorts) and Summer Shadows, Sault Ste. Marie (outdoors)
Junction North Film Festival, Sudbury
North Bay Film Festival
Sudbury Outdoor Adventure Reels (SOARS)
Northern Frights Festival, North Bay
Northwest Film Festival, Thunder Bay
Queer North, Sudbury
Vox Popular, Thunder Bay
Weengushk International Film Festival, Manitoulin Island

Service Organizations
Creative Industries – North Bay
Cultural Industries Ontario North – Sudbury

Equipment and Tech Resources
Near North Mobile Media Lab has an equipment rental program and will ship to artists throughout the region.
Digital Creator North provides space through libraries, museums, and galleries in six communities (Elliot Lake, Kenora, Temiskaming Shores, Timmins, Sioux Lookout, and Sault Ste. Marie). These will reopen in conjunction with the province's COVID protocols. These programs have historically been aimed at youth and emerging artists, but expansion of the mandate is possible and would enable the program to offer more responsibility and provide better service to the communities. The program provides access to a range of media equipment, peer-to-peer learning, and support and training by an on-site experienced media artist. Digital Creator North is establishing a virtual lab to increase accessibility to programming given the context of COVID and the geographical limitations in the region.

Community channel in Sault Ste. Marie: The local community channel in Sault Ste. Marie has equipment and can support artists to create short works toward the channel's commitment to seeking and airing local content. (For more on the Sault Ste. Marie film case study and training and mentoring, see here.)

Funders such as the CCA now enable the purchase of $1,000 in equipment in project budgets. The OAC's Indigenous Visual Arts Materials Program allows for $500 or $1,000 purchases of small tools and equipment and/or other materials for arts and craft production. CatalystsX and the Northern Lights Collaborative Project helps to reduce social isolation of youth in the North. They provide funding and/or connections to funding opportunities, workshops and other resources to youth ages 15 to 35.

Broadcasting, Journalism, and related resources
Northern Aboriginal Broadcasting Program
- Funds the capital expenses to set up towers and other equipment necessary to establish a community radio station.
- Eligibility: "should" reach listeners north of the 55th parallel.
- The fund can be applied to each year for upgrades, staffing, and other operating expenses.

Contact:

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Indigenous Language Component

- One- and two-year funding to support programming, app development, land-based training, and all kinds of activities.
- It does say that it supports some equipment purchase (not capital).
- In Ontario the program is managed by partner First Nations Confederacy of Cultural Education Centres.
- Equipment allowances are eligible, but there must be a demonstrable link to Program objectives and acknowledgement of funding priorities.

Contact:

Farnaz Moin-Manavi

Program Officer, Indigenous Languages Branch

Department of Canadian Heritage/Government of Canada

farnaz.moin-manavi@canada.ca/1-819-360-8971

Local Journalism Initiative

"The Local Journalism Initiative (LJI) supports the creation of original civic journalism that covers the diverse needs of underserved communities across Canada.

Funding is available to eligible Canadian media organizations to hire journalists or pay freelance journalists to produce civic journalism for underserved communities. The content produced will be made available to media organizations through a Creative Commons license so that Canadians can be better informed."

Other funding sources

The Canada Media Fund and Listen, Hear Our Voices initiative

Pirate and low-tech radio

Berkeley Free Radio

Gimaa Radio

Municipal and Regional granting programs and resources

Municipal arts grants are available through several cities in the region, some for organizations only, others for both artists and organizations. Sault Ste. Marie, for example, provides grants to both incorporated and unincorporated cultural organizations, as well as support for artists, collectives and groups to participate in provincial, national, or international cultural competitions. Creative Industries, through the support of the City of North Bay, is currently developing a micro-granting program. See also Thunder Bay and Sudbury. Northern Ontario Women: annual grants up to $5,000 for businesses, including arts and culture.

PARO supports women in enterprise with a range of resources. Other sources of business loans include FedNor, Waubetek, and local Community Futures Development Corporations.

Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation (NOHFC) provides grants for the film industry and community events. Arts-based businesses with a strong business case can apply into the Invest or Grow streams and organizations may apply for internships.

Northern Ontario Development Ideas and Knowledge (NORDIK) Institute provides virtual programs to support female-identifying entrepreneurs develop their business, including art- and culture-based projects, in collaboration with the Women in Social Enterprise Network. They also have a number of research reports on the arts and culture sector available on their website.

Provincial Grants and Resources

The Ontario Arts Council Grants for artists, ad hoc collectives, and organizations. Create a profile through NOVA, their granting portal, and become familiar with the various granting programs. Artists are eligible to receive three grants per year, plus Indigenous Visual Arts Materials micro-grants. For media artists, several programs are particularly relevant: Media Arts Projects, Northern Arts Projects, Artists in Communities and Schools Projects, and Indigenous Arts Projects. The Northern Arts Projects grants support media arts project activities including writing scripts (which is ineligible in the Media Arts program), as well as mentorships and professional development.

Ontario Creates "is an agency of the provincial government whose mandate is to be a catalyst for economic development, investment and collaboration in Ontario's creative industries including the music, book, magazine, film, television and interactive digital media sectors, both domestically and internationally."

Ontario Cultural Attractions Fund supports significant cultural events organized by non-profits.

Infrastructure Ontario provides infrastructure funding for non-profit professional arts training institutes.

Work In Culture provides a range of resources for artists and cultural workers, including research, sector information, job postings, workshops and networking opportunities.

Federal Grants

The Canada Council for the Arts provides grants for artists, collectives, and organizations. Applicants must first create a profile, including uploading a CV which will be reviewed for eligibility to apply for grants. Emerging artists without the level of experience necessary for approval into the regular granting stream, may request approval as a New/Early Career applicant. In addition to regular projects, the CCA has a $10,000 professional development fund which can support mentorships and specialized training.

Heritage Canada has a number of programs to support arts programming, infrastructure, and other activities by incorporated arts organizations.

Protocols, Guides, and related resources

Onscreen Protocols and Pathways: A Media Production Guide to Working with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Communities, Cultures, Concepts, and Stories commissioned by ImagineNATIVE.

To learn more about on screen protocols for working in Indigenous communities: https://store.imaginenative.org/collections/publications-collection/products/on-screen-protocols-pathways.

To learn more about OCAP: Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession
https://fnigc.ca/ocap-training/
https://www.afn.ca/uploads/files/nihbforum/info_and_privacy_doc-ocap.pdf

Institute for Research Design in Librarianship (IRDL): "The IRDL Scholars Speaker Series is designed to shine a spotlight on voices and ideas that challenge traditional ways of conducting research. It surveys various topics, including specific research methods and critiques of processes associated with western social science approaches, with the intention of inspiring research explicitly rooted in social justice. As librarians, educators, and researchers, we welcome this opportunity to reflect and incorporate what we learn from these speakers into our own research efforts, so that our methodologies integrate anti-racist and

anti-colonial practices." This series of webinars is available via YouTube. Topics include, storying research practices, de/colonizing research practices, and critical race spatial analysis.

To learn more about Dokis First Nation's collections protocols and story projects:
- Collections protocols
- Taking Care of Our Stories Project

A Toolkit for Inclusion and Accessibility: Changing the Narrative of Disability in Documentary Film (although not Canadian) is available through FWD-Doc: https://www.fwd-doc.org/toolkit.

Audio description (AD) tools have been developed to make films more accessible for blind and low-vision audiences, including the films included in the New Day distribution co-op: https://www.newday.com/blog/2019-01-14-audio-description-tool-equity.

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APPENDIX 3: PROJECT ARCHIVE

The Shingwauk Project and Algoma University Archives in Sault Ste. Marie will be housing the research materials from this project. The fond will include: conversation circle videos, audio files, transcripts, meeting notes, facilitator reports and other relevant materials, where we have been given permission to share. The archival materials can be used by artists, organizations, researchers, community members, and all others interested in learning about the arts in northern Ontario.

As we cannot control how digital documents are circulated, we request that care is considered when sharing, downloading, or otherwise disseminating the documents, and to seek permission from the participants for re-use and dissemination.

Please note that all participants in the project retain the right to further redact, change or entirely remove quotes and other references to them at any time.

The fond will be available in the late fall of 2022. To access the materials, or request a change to your quotes or content related to you and your work, visit:

archives.algomau.ca

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ART FIX REPORT

Onwards Online with Art Fix

2020/2021 and beyond:
A community environmental scan

Prepared By
Lindsay Sullivan
Rémi Alie

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Partners

MANO RAMO

Mission

Art Fix of Nipissing is an art collective in North Bay, ON run by and for artists with lived experiences of mental health. Art Fix's members variously describe ourselves as mad artists, artists with gifts, artists with extraordinary minds, disabled artists, mentally chill artists, as so on.

We embrace the diversity of member artists' experiences, and so find coherence – as a collective – in the principles of respect, equity, and interdependence. By working together, Art Fix members are elevating, inspiring, and otherwise supporting one another's arts practices.

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PROJECT OVERVIEW

Largely volunteer-run since 2015, Art Fix of Nipissing is a collective run by and for artists with lives experiences of mental health. We have a unique impact in North Bay as one of the most accessible sources of programming for mental wellness and community connection. We do not require a medical referral and have proudly upheld a no-exceptions open-door policy since 2015.

Our core activities include an annual juried exhibition and storytelling event (as part of Mental Health Week activities in North Bay), a weekly open studio, mentorships for professional development, and since 2018, free arts training programs. Having incubated with White Water Gallery (WWG) in North Bay since 2015, our participation in Workman Art's Scaling Project (2018-2021) has more than doubled the collective's membership and audience base. Most recently, Art Fix's Intergenerational Mural Project "May We All Be Well", offered a hopeful vision of our future within a public mural. Currently we are planning to provide tablets to community members through an Artist Resiliency Project as an adaptation during COVID 19.

The COVID-19 pandemic simultaneously intensified the need for such programming, while impacting our ability to deliver through familiar channels. Although we successfully and rapidly transitioned to remote, digital programming, we anticipate that hybrid programming will continue to play a key role in reaching our communities as we move forward. At Art Fix, digital, online, and hybrid programming are here to stay.

As a result, this project offered a unique opportunity to evaluate the impact, meaningfulness, and efficacy of Art Fix's programming since going online.

Project details.

In 2020/21, Indigenous Culture and Media Innovation (ICMI) and the Media Arts Network of Ontario (MANO) launched a collaborative, community-based project in Northern Ontario to connect regional and local needs. Working with facilitators, advisors, and partner organizations from across the region – including Art Fix of Nipissing – they have encouraged community-based conversations regarding needs and strategies for digital tools and infrastructure.

The purpose of this research and evaluation project, titled "Onwards Online with Art Fix," was to gain a detailed understanding of the impact and efficacy of our programming through the transition from in-person-only to hybrid modes of program delivery.

Project context: From analog to 'hybrid' programming

For Art Fix, the experience of transitioning to hybrid programming was deeply conditioned by our prior existence as a highly analog organization. This section outlines the reality of our day-to-day operations prior to COVID-19, and contextualizes our shift to a hybrid programming model from March to September 2021.

Prior to the digital transition, Art Fix ran a weekly Open Studio, which did not require pre-registration. Community members were welcome to drop by the White Water Gallery in North Bay, access a wide variety of art supplies, and participate by working on their own art project. If a community member wanted to work with a material that was not on hand, Art Fix staff or volunteers would simply arrange to purchase it.

As a collective by and for artists with lived experience of mental health, Art Fix offered a unique programming experience in the North Bay community. Participation was on a non-clinical basis and required no paperwork – in the words of Lindsay Sullivan, "We work with folks who have lived experience, and at no time do we ask people to prove what their experience is."

Traditionally, Art Fix has grown its community via analog means. We have connected with other professional artists and facilitators through calls for artists. Although Open Studio was run strictly on a drop-in basis, community members were asked to pre-register for art workshops – and registrations were recorded in-person, on paper, at the White Water Gallery.

Across a wide spectrum of our day-to-day activities and organizational logistics – programming, community growth, relationships with the local arts community, administration and organizing – Art Fix had been a deeply analog organization. And, **instead of hampering our growth or efficiency, that analog reality reflected our values.** Community members were *not* asked to document their experiences; our drop-in Open Studios *were* an accessible way to share updates and administrate programming.

> "Speaking only for myself, the experience of going online felt quite different. I could really feel a shift. We were very analog, and now we're online. We didn't even have a mailing list. To me, Whitewater Gallery felt very much like a drop-in place where people would just come in, grab a cup of coffee, and make art. Evolution and change are integral, and I always welcome that, but there didn't seem to be an immediacy for an email list. For example, if I didn't see folks, I would call them from our phone list. Now it's all of the above – we have folks who we call, and folks on an email list."
>
> Lindsay Sullivan, Art Training Program Coordinator with Art Fix

Methodology

Study design

This study was structured as a community environmental scan of the three key stakeholder groups which interact with Art Fix programming:

> 1. Art Fix collective online programming participants (Fall 2020 – Winter 2021)
>
> 2. Members of the general public who have accessed our programming in the past, or who expressed an interest in future engagement.
>
> 3. Community organizations in the North Bay region.

Three research surveys were designed for each of these stakeholder groups. Methodologically, we took a grounded theory approach which offered the flexibility to iterate our questions and conversations to better reflect what we learned about the experiences of our participants on the ground. We used a mixed-methods approach for data collection that included online and telephone surveys. The surveys included a combination of quantitative questions and longer qualitative responses which invited more detailed reflection. All individual participants were compensated for their time.

Data collection

Data were collected from April – June 2021. Participants gave informed consent before data collection. Surveys were conducted via Google Forms. In some cases, Lindsay Sullivan assisted individuals from the public to complete their responses by telephone. Individuals in community living settings received support from organizational staff in recording and submitting their responses.

Art Fix Participant Survey

A survey was conducted online and by telephone with 20 current Art Fix participants/collective members 18 years and older. The survey was publicized via our mailing list using contact information previously provided to Art Fix from online/virtual art training programming from Fall 2020 – Winter 2021, and sought to understand how community members were interacting with Art Fix's hybrid programming; how Art Fix programming supported their mental wellness and community connections; and, how our programming could evolve to better serve them (See Section 1.1, 'Participant demographics and involvement,' for a complete picture of survey participant demographics).

20
Art Fix participants surveyed

Art Fix Public Survey

A survey was conducted online and by telephone with 6 members of the public who had either 1) previously interacted with Art Fix programming in-person, or 2) who were interested in participating in the future. This survey was widely publicized via television and radio announcements (Cogeco News, ROCK FM) and social media (Facebook).

6
Members of the public interviewed or responded

Art Fix Community Partner Survey

An online survey was conducted to seek responses from community partners in the North Bay region. The survey was publicized by email to the partner organizations on our Steering Committee, who were also invited to circulate the survey within their networks, and with a broader variety of community organizations beyond our Steering Committee. We received a total of 10 responses from individuals associated with the following partner organizations:

6
Community partner organizations represented

- Nipissing First Nation – Ojibway Women's Lodge
- Nipissing Mental Health Housing & Support Services (NMHHSS)
- North Bay Indigenous Friendship Centre
- North Bay Jail
- North Bay Regional Health Centre (NBRHC)
- The PADDLE Program (Providing Adults with Developmental Disabilities Lifelong Experiences)

Data ownership, control, access, and possession

Art Fix of Nipissing and individual survey participants will retain all ownership, control and possession of materials and data produced, knowledge shared and information gathered; however, permission is granted to ICMI and MANO to use and access all research participants have agreed to share (data collected, reports produced, information and materials created) for the purposes of developing reports, advocacy, public communications and other functions; all participants and communities may access gathered information and reports at any time. MANO and ICMI will house reports and data on their websites, in internal and shared platforms, and via social media, but communities may request that information be removed. MANO will ensure that all Facilitators and Participants are credited in all future use, publication, or citation of the research.

Members of the Art Fix team (which may include staff or volunteers from White Water Galley) may have access to the survey data. To ensure the integrity of the survey responses, respondents were asked to provide their names and contact information. Art Fix will not share respondent names and contact information with our partners, with current or potential funders, or with the public. We may quote open text answers, but they will remain anonymous to the public.

KEY FINDINGS

The following section summarizes the insights gained from two sources: 1) participants' responses to quantitative questions, reported in graphic form, and 2) longer-form responses to qualitative questions. These written responses have been reprinted verbatim, with minimal editing for clarity and to remove some identifying features.

This section will address the results of the Art Fix Participant Survey, the Art Fix Public Survey, and the Art Fix Community Partner Survey, respectively.

1. Art Fix Participant Survey
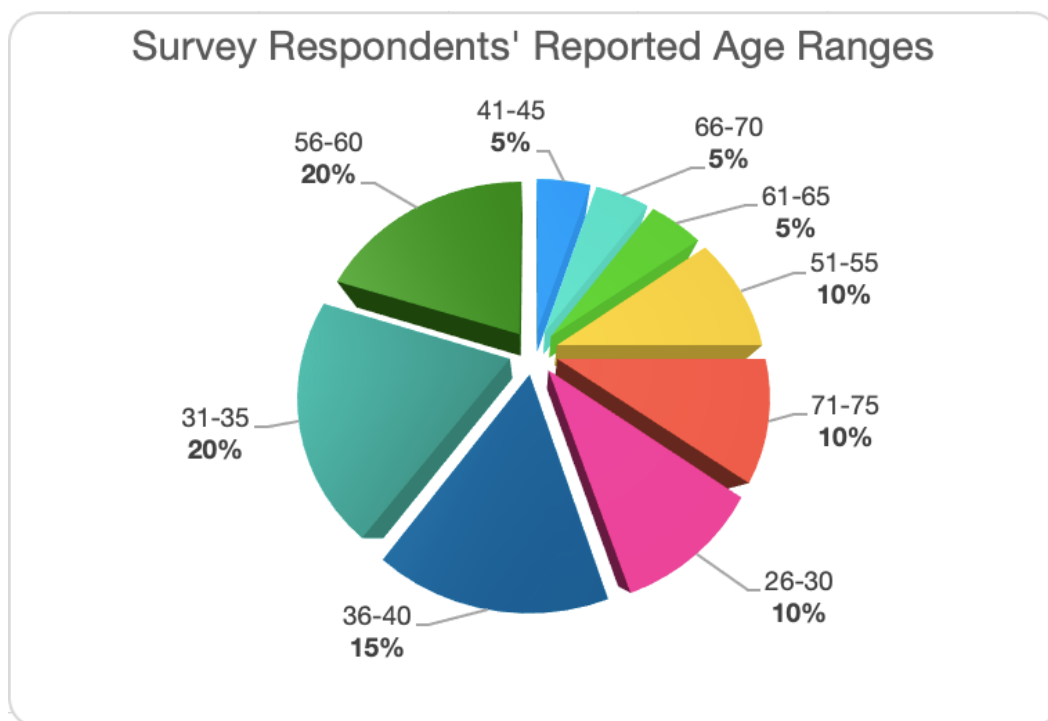
1.1 Participant demographics and involvement
We invited participants to share details about their age, their artistic practice, and their participation in Art Fix programming.

20
Art Fix participants surveyed

Figure 1. Age of Art Fix Participants
Distribution of total respondents' selection of one category.

Survey Respondents' Reported Age Ranges

- 41-45 **5%**
- 66-70 **5%**
- 56-60 **20%**
- 61-65 **5%**
- 51-55 **10%**
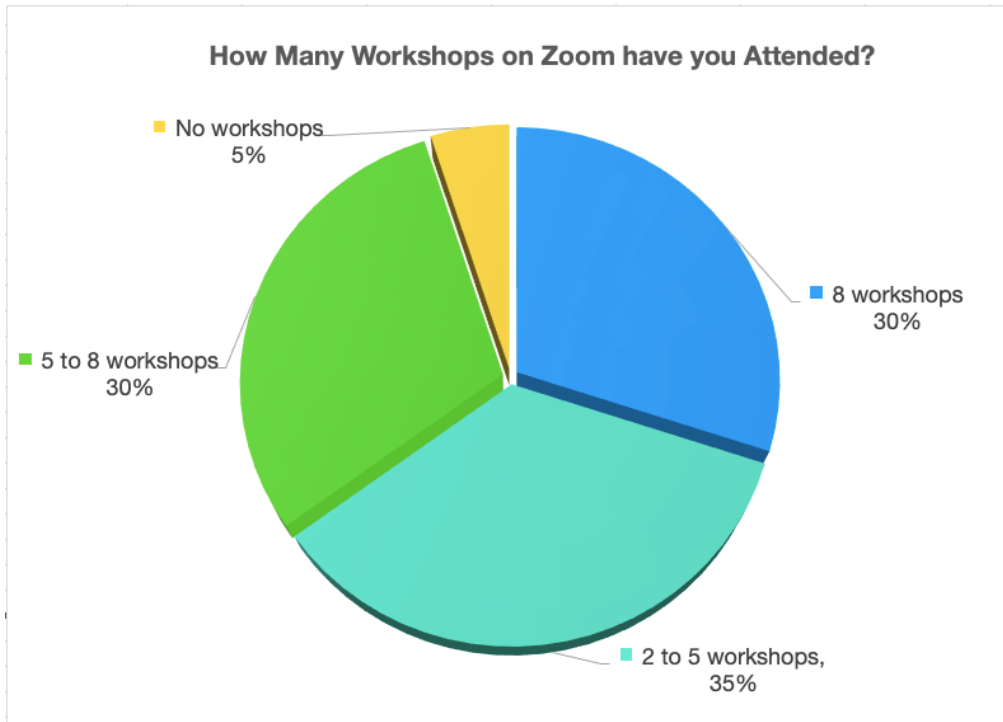- 31-35 **20%**
- 71-75 **10%**
- 36-40 **15%**
- 26-30 **10%**

Figure 2. Art Fix participation

Distribution of total respondents' selection of one category.

Participants were asked to identify how frequently they participated in online programming, both live Zoom workshops and pre-recorded Art Tutorial videos.

How Many Workshops on Zoom have you Attended?

- No workshops 5%
- 8 workshops 30%
- 5 to 8 workshops 30%
- 2 to 5 workshops, 35%

Note: This figure represents participants' selection of one category. Although the selection options overlap, there is unfortunately no way to further disaggregate this data. However, we would emphasize the extent of the engagement reflected here – 60% of respondents attended 5-8 workshops.

Did you watch the ArtTutorial Videos?

- 30%
- 35%
- 35%

■ Yes ■ Some but not all ■ No

8
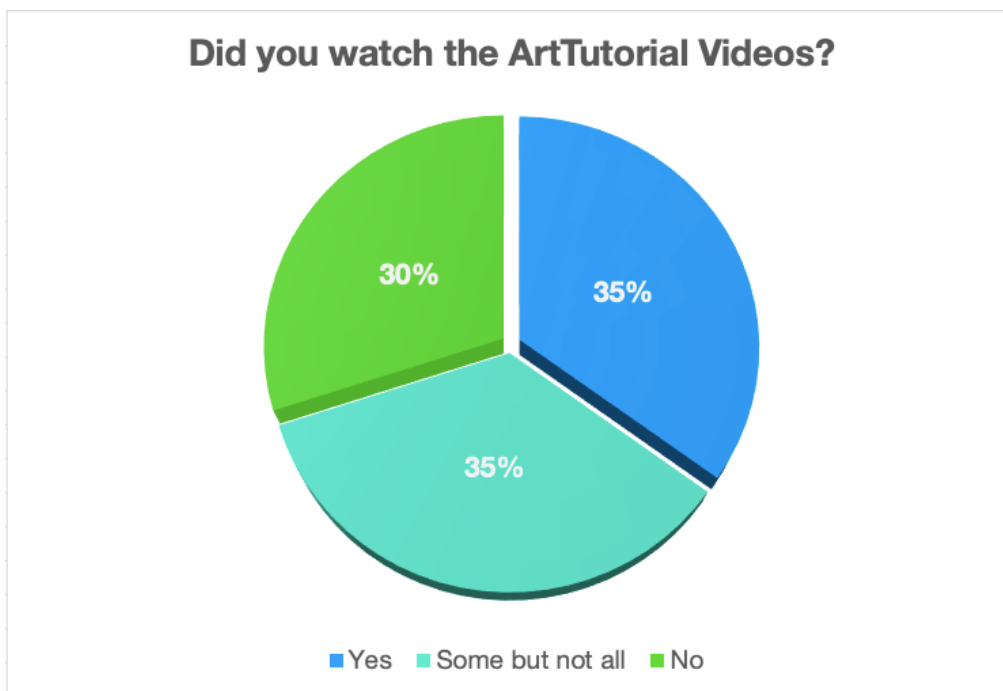
Qualitative responses: Artistic practice

Art Fix participants were asked to describe their artistic practice:

- Photography, videography, poetry, visual storytelling
- I am retired and have been pondering about what to do to keep me inspired and busy. I began by taking up an old actively of watercolour painting and realized I needed support. I also wished for group lessons and activities.
- Painting, photography
- Painting, cardmaking, quilting
- Multidisciplinary Artist
- PRINTMAKING, MIXED MEDIA
- I like to try new things
- Advance
- Crafting of all kinds
- Novice
- Poet, writer, and artist
- Writing and photography
- Music, art, photography
- I love watercolour, drawing, poetry, writing and collage and photography (scrapbooking) lol all art forms I think.
- Mostly Painting but do participate occasionally in all of the above.
- Experimental
- Painting & Poetry
- Painting
- Poetry & Sketching
- Musically inclined, curious to all artistic expression

1.2 Art programming and mental wellness

Participants were asked a number of questions about the impact of Art Fix programming, and the arts in general, on their mental wellness and feelings of community connectedness.

Figure 3. Impact of Art Fix programming on mental wellness
Distribution of total respondents' selection of one category.

What has the impact of your involvement with Art Fix online programming been for your mental health, social inclusion, or connection to the community?

- Art Fix did not make a difference in my mental health at all. 2%
- Art Fix did not make me feel more connected to my community. 2%
- I feel better connected to my community because of my involvement with Art Fix Training. 31%
- I feel that participating in Art Fix has had positive benefits on my mental health. 34%
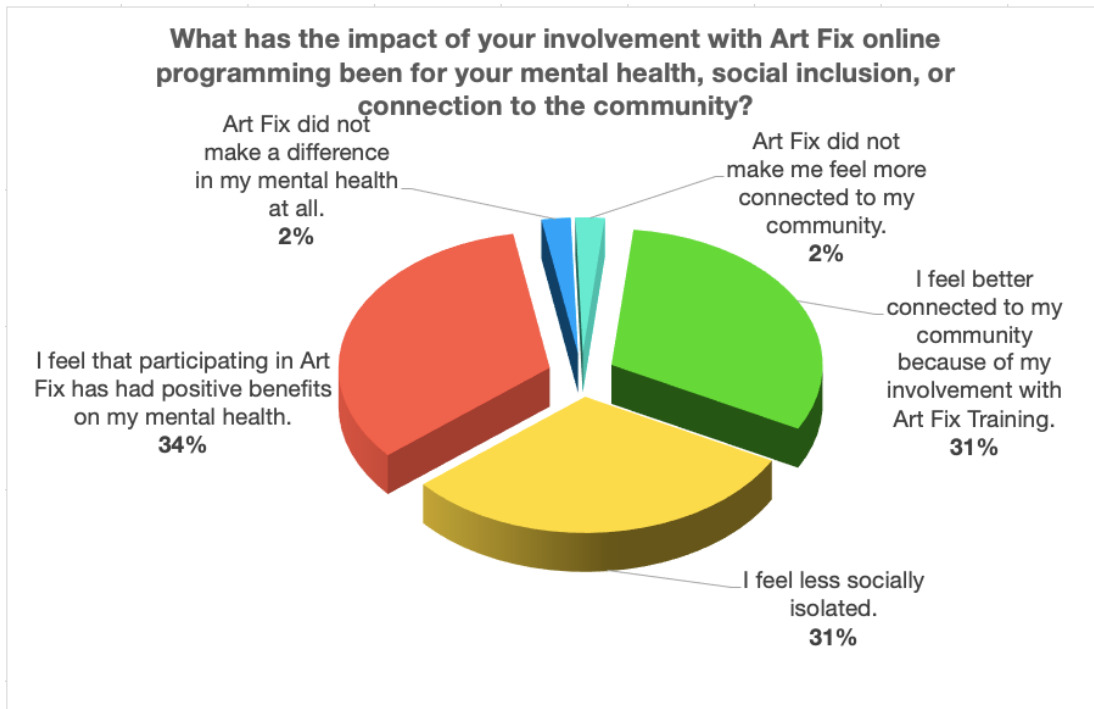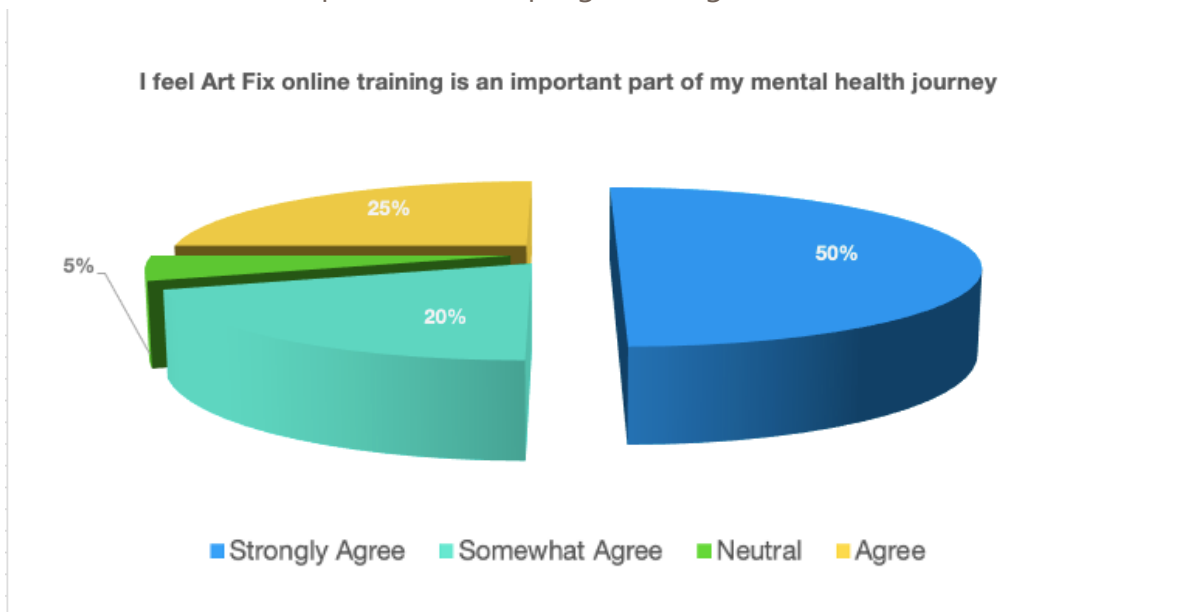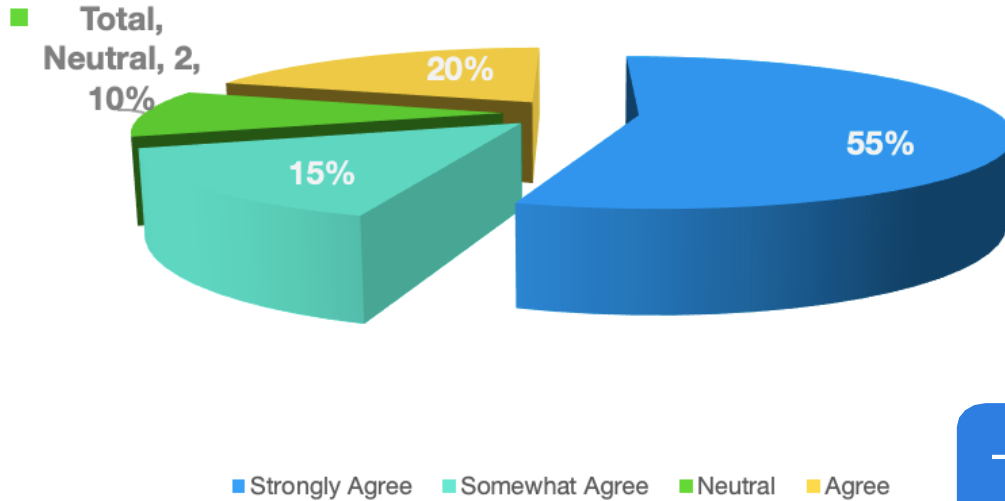- I feel less socially isolated. 31%

Figure 4. Art Fix participation and mental wellness
Distribution of total respondents' selection of one category. Participants were asked to characterize the impact of Art Fix programming on their mental wellness.


I feel Art Fix online training is an important part of my mental health journey

- 25%
- 5%
- 20%
- 50%

■ Strongly Agree   ■ Somewhat Agree   ■ Neutral   ■ Agree

I feel less stressed when participating in Art Fix training online

Total, Neutral, 2, 10%

20%

15%

55%

■ Strongly Agree ■ Somewhat Agree ■ Neutral ■ Agree

> 66
>
> Everyone is very kind and supportive, which has helped keep a lot of hope and connection alive for me this year.
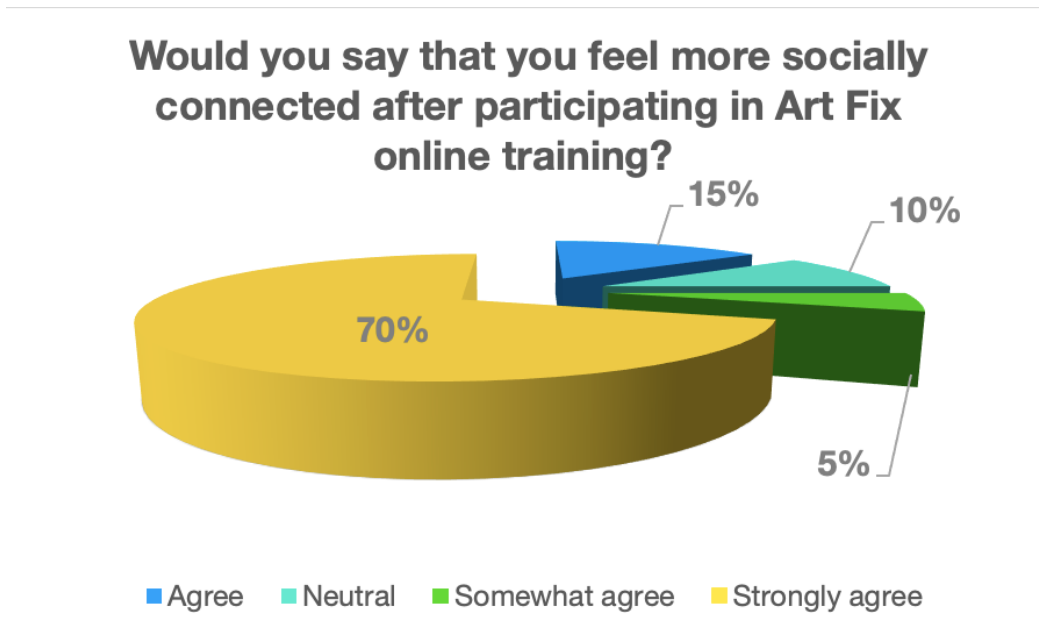>
> 99

I feel my happiest when I participate in Art Fix online training

5%

15%

10%

15%

55%

■ Strongly Agree ■ Somewhat Agree ■ Neutral ■ Disagree ■ Agree
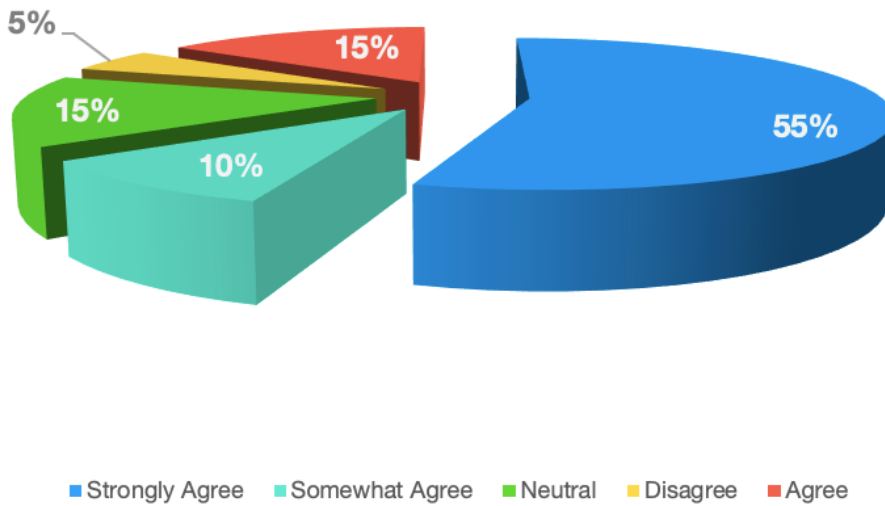
Figure 5. Art Fix participation and social connectedness
Distribution of total respondents' selection of one category. Participants were asked to characterize the impact of Art Fix programming on their feelings of social connectedness.

Would you say that you feel more socially connected after participating in Art Fix online training?

15%
10%
70%
5%

■ Agree ■ Neutral ■ Somewhat agree ■ Strongly agree

Qualitative responses
Art Fix participants were asked to elaborate on the impact that Art Fix has on their mental wellness, social connectedness, connection to community, or anything else they felt important to share:

- I love being able to connect with others through creativity. Especially during these times of COVID, Art Fix provided a space to come together safely and have some fun! Everyone is very kind and supportive, which has helped keep a lot of hope and connection alive for me this year.
- I began participating at the beginning of the pandemic and was relieved that I could see people on zoom. Over the whole time I feel I have made friends that I know I will contact after the pandemic as well as go in person to the Art Fix location to interact. Each of the activities that I selected were very worthwhile in giving me information on how to create many things from painting to writing poetry, fiction and scriptwriting for small films as well as weaving and beading. Mentally, all of these activities have helped me to step forward in continuing to do these things on my own and to keep me thinking about how important it is to keep busy to avoid mental stresses.
- Helped me to feel more involved in the community knowing others also had mental health challenges. Helped me in challenging thoughts of it being perfect the first time.
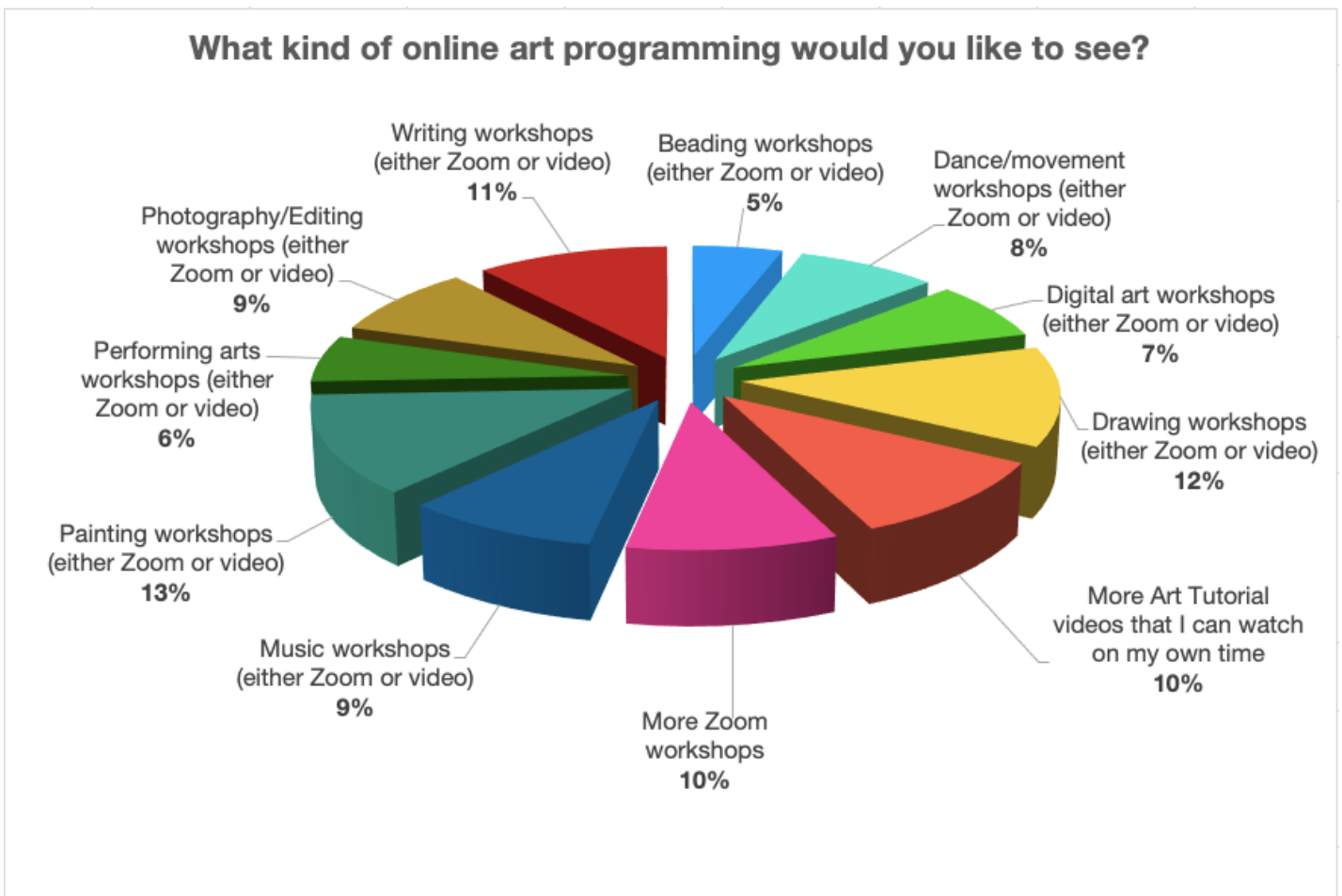
- Photography, videography, poetry, visual storytelling
- Prior to joining art fix I was very depressed and isolated felt so much alone. I had no connections and didn't feel like I was part of anything. I just didn't want to wake up in the morning. After becoming involved in the art fix program my mental health improved so much because I felt like I belonged somewhere and it gave me something to focus on. I don't know how I would have gotten through the last few months without the art fix program.
- Contributing to the inter-generational mural was so uplifting, that I was participating in something made by many!
- IT GAVE ME SOMETHING TO LOOK FORWARD TO EACH WEEK AND HELPED KEEP STRUCTURE IN MY LIFE IN THESE CRAZY COVID TIMES.
- When I was actually present at the workshops the teachers offered warm support making my efforts feel valued.
- It's made me more confident with myself and my creativity.
- It's wonderful to get to know people who have similar interests!
- Interacting with other people has been great
- I loved that Art Fix helped me to be together alone while working on personal art/drawings while connected online with others, hearing from other participant writers about their writing and how it helped them, the team approach to digital art and podcast programs, and felt my best and most socially included during the improv program! Bravo!
- It helped me through a dark time.
- I feel that art fix is essential to one's mental health! So often, I have avoided taking part in art events, but I totally subscribe to one where the only prerequisite is that you Do have , or have experienced a mental illness.
- That's very cool! it's an equalizer...especially having the artists and the instructors in the same boat.
- Before I discovered art fix I was diagnosed as severely depressed. I thought about suicide almost daily. Since I started Art Fix about a year ago I have only had two brief difficult periods. I'm so so so thankful. Ty so much for this amazing programming!! For me it's important to be social so I've most enjoyed the classes on zoom [...].
- While struggling with anxiety for most of my adult life I was often worried about falling into a longtime anxious episode with all that was going on. At work I was fine keeping my mind busy and also at home with family. However down time I often would think about everything. Artfix allowed me to put my mind on something useful and fun, while also giving me a purpose to do more art!
- It has been nice to connect with others creatively.
- Enjoy connecting with others creatively.
- I feel proud after, I have achieved something.
- It's a good way to get lessons showing different ways to do art.
- It will be great to return to in person activities, but online tutorials with resources available for pickup or delivery are great for people dealing with accessibility issues.

1.3 Evaluating hybrid programming delivery

Participants were asked to respond to a number of questions about Art Fix programming over 2020/21. They spoke to their experience of online/hybrid programming, the methods of programming delivery that would best support them, and specific preferences for future program offerings.

Figure 6. Feedback: Program offerings

Distribution of total respondents' selection of multiple categories. Participants were asked to provide feedback on the specific programming offerings they would prefer in the future.

What kind of online art programming would you like to see?

- Writing workshops (either Zoom or video) 11%
- Beading workshops (either Zoom or video) 5%
- Dance/movement workshops (either Zoom or video) 8%
- Photography/Editing workshops (either Zoom or video) 9%
- Digital art workshops (either Zoom or video) 7%
- Performing arts workshops (either Zoom or video) 6%
- Drawing workshops (either Zoom or video) 12%
- Painting workshops (either Zoom or video) 13%
- More Art Tutorial videos that I can watch on my own time 10%
- Music workshops (either Zoom or video) 9%
- More Zoom workshops 10%

> " I like feeling a greater connection with others for being in-person and helps me to get out and interact with others. I also like the option of Zoom and YouTube when I feel like being in my own personal space "
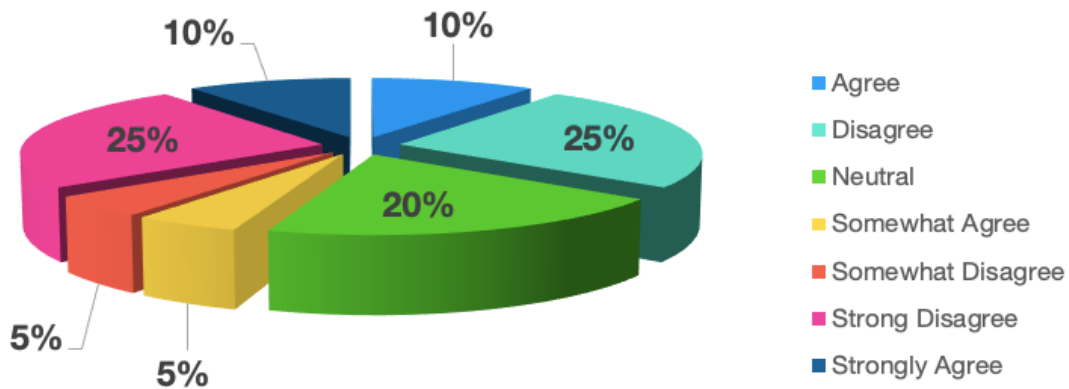
14

Participants provided specific feedback regarding their experiences of the digital programming which Art Fix offered during 2020/21. Each chart indicates the distribution of participants' selection of one category.
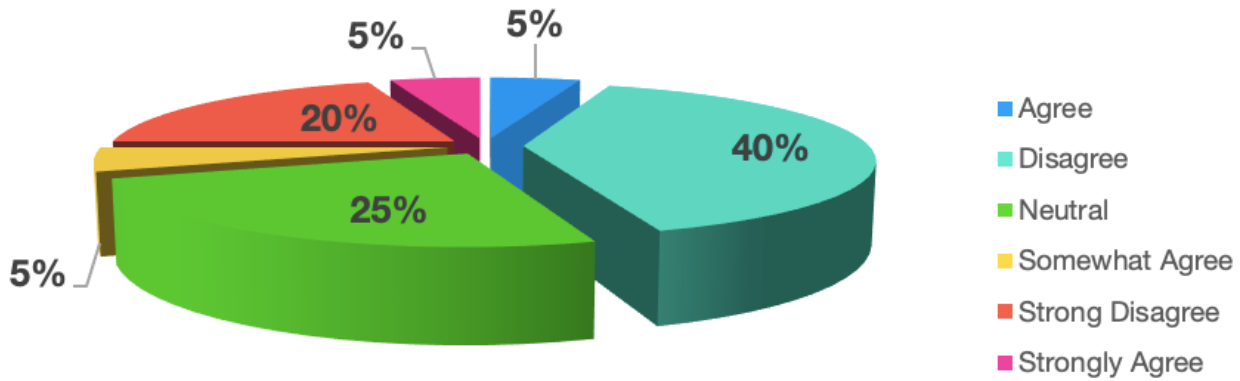
There were too many workshops offered

- Disagree
- Neutral
- Somewhat Agree
- Strong Disagree
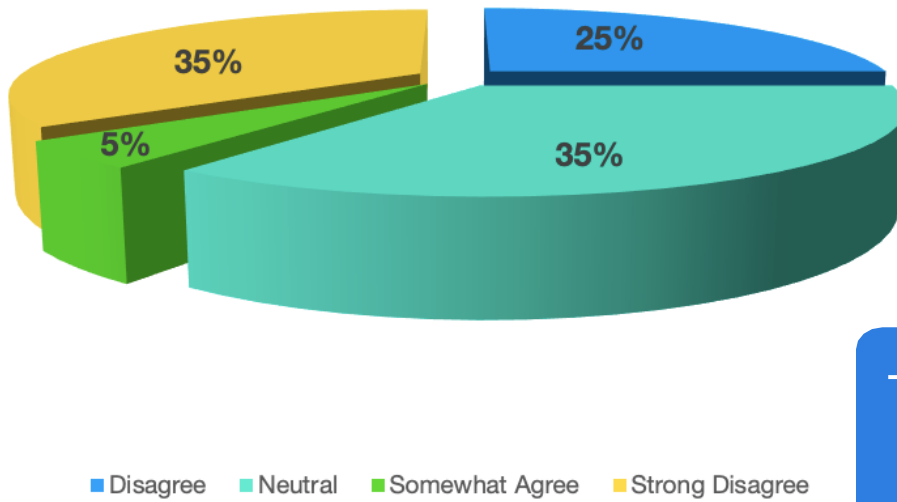
> **"**
> Zoom and youtube videos have been a lifesaver throughout lockdown…
> **"**

There were not enough workshops offered

- Agree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Somewhat Agree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Strong Disagree
- Strongly Agree

15

I found it was too much time spent on a computer

5% 5%
5%
20%
25%
40%

- Agree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Somewhat Agree
- Strong Disagree
- Strongly Agree

I would consider my internet to be reliable

40%
40%
15%
5%

- Agree
- Neutral
- Somewhat Agree
- Strongly Agree

> " As a disabled artist zoom has allowed me to participate barrier-free. "

16
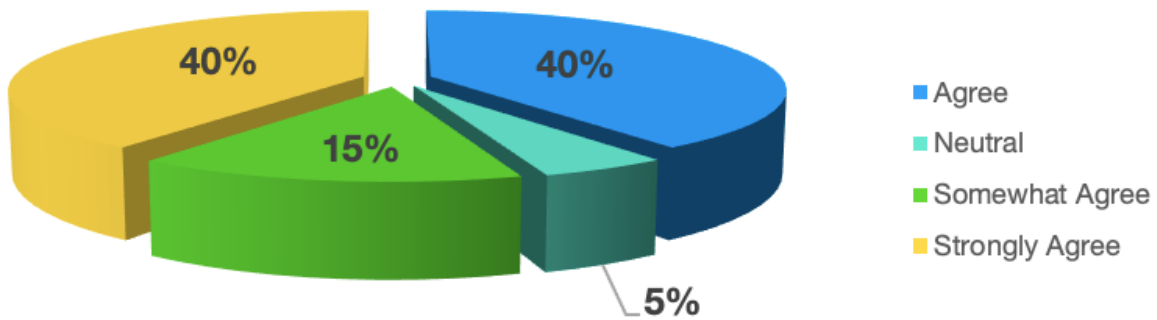
There were too many technical glitches

- Agree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Somewhat Agree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Strong Disagree
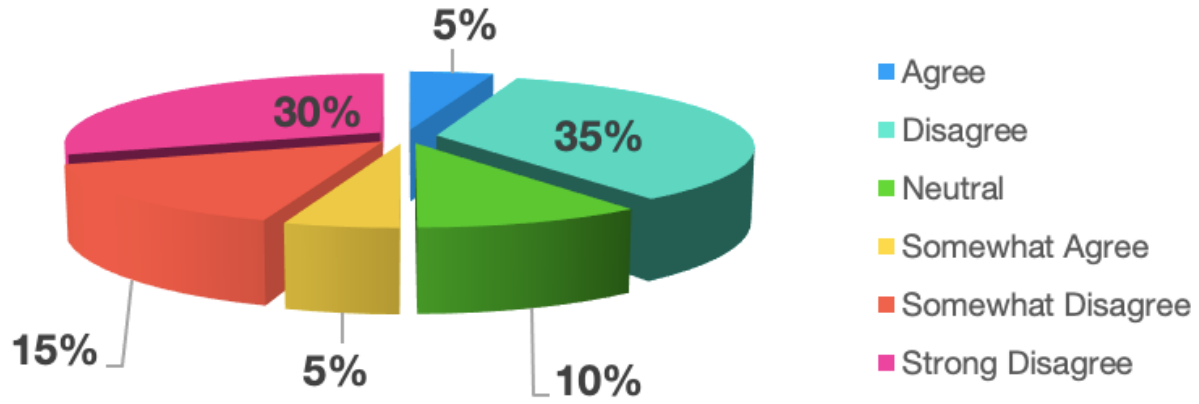
The timing of the Zoom workshops worked with my schedule

- Agree
- Neutral
- Somewhat Agree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Strong Disagree
- Strongly Agree
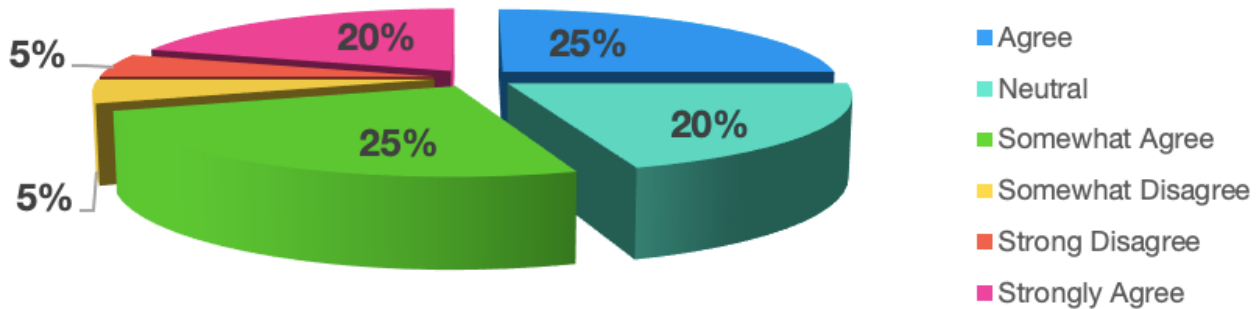
Participants offered feedback regarding Art Fix's programming delivery in the future. Overwhelmingly, participants indicated a preference for hybrid programming moving forward from 2020/21, and showed reasonable interest in a hybrid programming model using pre-loaded, off-line tablets. Each chart indicates the distribution of participants' selection of one category.
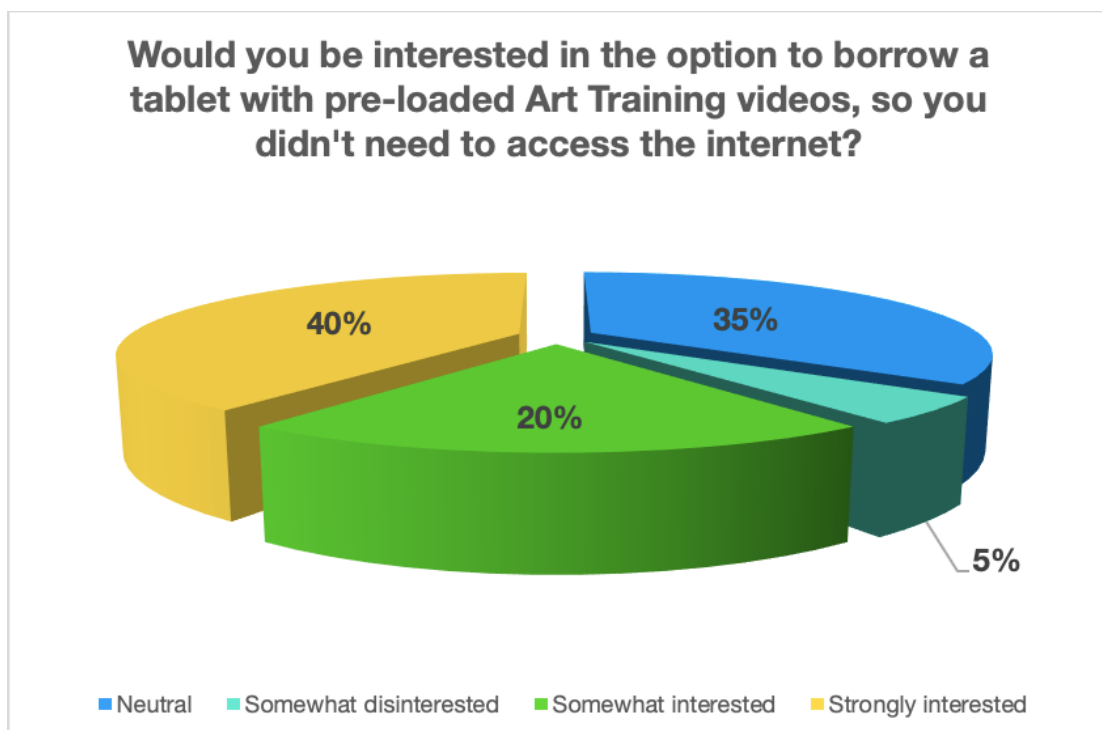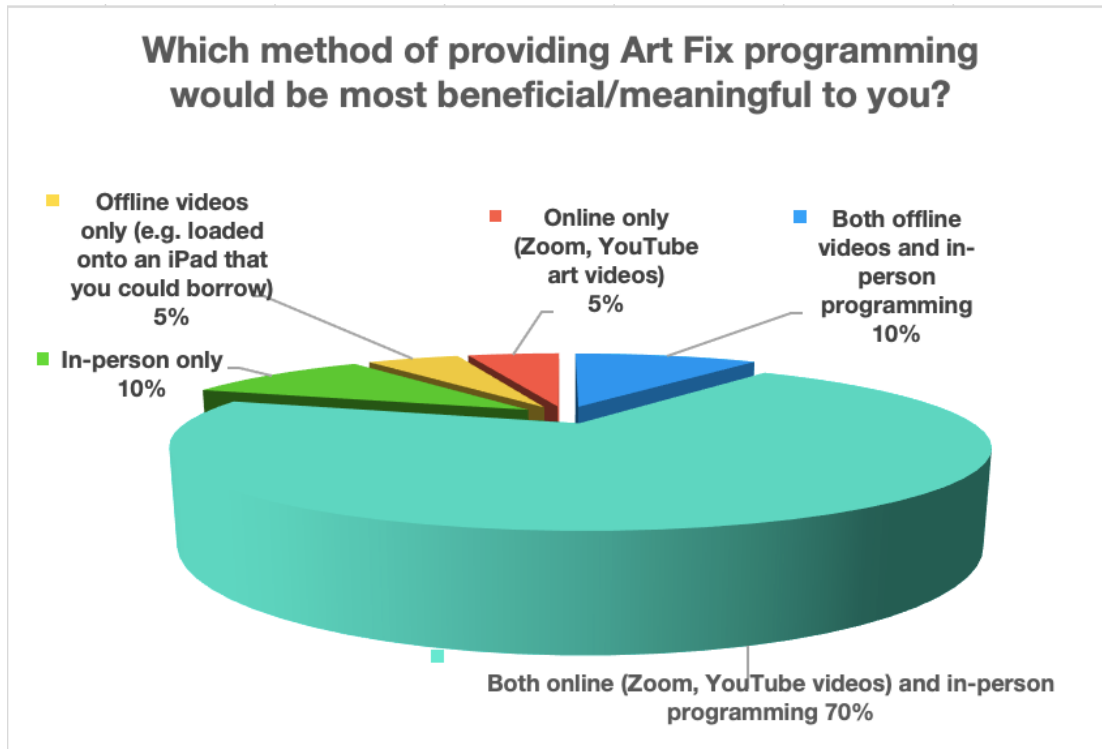
Which method of providing Art Fix programming would be most beneficial/meaningful to you?

- Offline videos only (e.g. loaded onto an iPad that you could borrow) 5%
- In-person only 10%
- Online only (Zoom, YouTube art videos) 5%
- Both offline videos and in-person programming 10%
- Both online (Zoom, YouTube videos) and in-person programming 70%

Would you be interested in the option to borrow a tablet with pre-loaded Art Training videos, so you didn't need to access the internet?

- 35%
- 40%
- 20%
- 5%

■ Neutral   ■ Somewhat disinterested   ■ Somewhat interested   ■ Strongly interested

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Art Fix participants were asked to elaborate on the methods of programming delivery that worked best for them.

- I think Art Fix did a wonderful job moving to online programming at this time that we needed to, and the instructors were excellent in making their tutorials accessible. Some sessions would be more effective in person, but I believe keeping things accessible online for folks who cannot attend in person, or want to watch a session they missed, is important to remain fully inclusive.
- Zoom, YouTube and in person programming are very useable for me and I look forward to all of the choices as I know I will use them effectively!
- I like feeling a greater connection with others for being in person and helps me to get out and interact with others. I also like the option of Zoom and YouTube when I feel like being in my own personal space.
- When I became part of art fix it was only available on zoom. I never had the opportunity to do any in person. I would love to be able to interact with people face to face although I do enjoy the zoom experience as well, I think in person would be a really nice addition to my journey.
- I enjoyed greatly the videos, they were so well done and I could watch on my own time. As a disabled artist zoom has allowed me to participate barrier free.
- I LOVE IN PERSON BUT I WAS ABLE TO CONNECT TO OTHER CLASSES ONLINE THAT WERE NOT IN OFFERED IN MY DISTRICT, WHICH WAS GREAT!!!
- By having a live person offering encouragement raised my spirits and ability to continue with learning new art experiences/broaden my horizons.
- Because of the pandemic, online programming was needed. However, I prefer in person programming when possible.
- In person would be more hands on with one-on-one help. On zoom is great when you cannot be there in person
- The flexibility (when possible) to have in person would be awesome (either outdoors or other controlled environments during COVID), and barring that the zoom option, still offers the presence of others.
- Sometimes it's nice to stay home and still be part of a class, and others its necessary to be near the teacher! Depends what kind of a learner you are. A good example is beading...it's a lovely art, and super relaxing, but for me, this is definitely an in person class. It's also nice to actually see people in person. Zoom and YouTube videos have been a lifesaver throughout lockdown...
- I'm social by nature so it's super important for me to have human interaction. Also, I'm handicapped and in a wheelchair going out exhausts me so having zoom classes has met all of my needs. I do plan though that when the gallery opens, I will attend some classes there. Maybe my [regular] group. Ty for this amazing opportunity.
- I liked online videos as you could join in with the group the best however due to life and work etc., I find the offline videos were great to do on your own time. As always though in person is wonderful to meet new people and get hands on help.

- I like in person.
- YouTube+ on going information + emails.
- To be connected with the community.
- I feel I would learn more.
- It's important to keep at it.
- Can do it on my own time and skip parts or watch more than once.
- Both – keep it inclusive to diverse needs.

Qualitative response: Pre-loaded tablets and programming delivery

Art Fix participants were asked to elaborate on the effectiveness of pre-loaded tablets for meeting their programming needs. They responded to the following prompts:

1) How would pre-loaded tablets fit with your lifestyle?
2) Would tablets be more or less accessible than in-person training, or online training which required internet access?
3) Would pre-loaded tablets support your artistic practice and goals?

- Personally I don't believe a pre-loaded tablet would suit my artistic practice, as I am satisfied with the current art training that is offered. However, I think this would be of great benefit to some folks who find it more difficult to use the internet or who cannot attend in person. Great idea!
- I believe that being able to accept tablets to use is a definite advantage for many people and I would be very glad that they would have this offer. It would help to include other people who would gain an outlet for themselves that they were not able to due to a lack of a number of things. I am able to use my internet.
- I don't think I would need a preloaded tablet as I already have my own laptop with reliable internet at home.
- Although I do have reliable internet service, I have to be aware of not being charged anything extra for using excess time. For that reason a preloaded tablet would work well but I did manage okay with the workshops I did attend without going over on my internet time.
- THIS WOULD BE NEW TO ME, SO I'M NOT SURE. BUT I WOULD TRY IT.
- Again, I would prefer to be there with people who offered support and encouragement (being skilled in their own area of expertise).
- Providing supplies has been a blessing. Tablets are a great idea for education.
- I think this is a fantastic idea! However, I would not need such services.
- Going on zoom was the best way.
- I would not like the option of having a preloaded tablet. This would eliminate the hugely needed presence of others!!!
- Sure.
- My answer is directly due to the fact that I only own a tablet and it didn't allow me to listen and speak normally.... I did manage to borrow a computer for some events. Otherwise my answer would have been...neutral. A new computer is on my wishlist!

- I think for me this would be beneficial as long as the videos didn't disappear. If I could download the videos to my iPad, then I would not waste your money. I like the idea that I would have the videos for a longer time … but I really like having classes with people on zoom.
- I feel preloaded tablets are an amazing option to offer people. And if I didn't have my own access to a laptop and internet, I would love this. However, I have my own so would feel bad taking one from someone else who may need it more. So having the option of the tablet as well as access to offline (or not schedule at certain times) videos from my own laptop would be beneficial.
- Available anytime.
- It would increase my participation.
- It's good to learn new techniques.
- I can do art whenever it is convenient.
- The pandemic has me exhausted. I can't handle screens right now. But in the future, I'm sure the tablets will be a beneficial tool.

Qualitative response: Hybrid programing and accessibility

Art Fix participants were asked to reflect on the accessibility of online and hybrid programming. They responded to the following prompts:

1) What prevented you from participating in hybrid/online programming?
2) How could the programming have been more accessible for you?
3) How do you think we could make Art Fix online arts training more accessible in the future?

- I missed some sessions due to a few scheduling issues. Would be nice to have them recorded so you could go to one that was missed.
- ONE CLASS I SIGNED UP FOR I COUND NOT ATTEND AS THE DAY AND TIME CHANGED.
- Don't feel I'm very computer smart. I like the personal interaction.
- Messenger would be easier.
- Everything was great
- Outside influences.
- I loved having access to the videos at later time as I was often working during most groups. However, being able to just jump online while at work and check out what was happening even if I couldn't follow along at that time was also super helpful. I was rarely able to come in for in house art groups, so I was excited to have this opportunity to participate remotely.

2. Art Fix Public Survey

2.1 Participant demographics and involvement

To understand how members of the public have interacted with Art Fix programming, we invited participants to share details regarding their age and previous participation. These participants had either 1) never engaged with programming, or 2) had only engaged with in-person programming prior to 2020.

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Members of the public interviewed or responded

Figure 8: Age of public survey participants
Distribution of total respondents' selection of one category.

**Age Range**

- 18-25 17%
- 26-30 33%
- 31-35 33%
- 51-55 17%
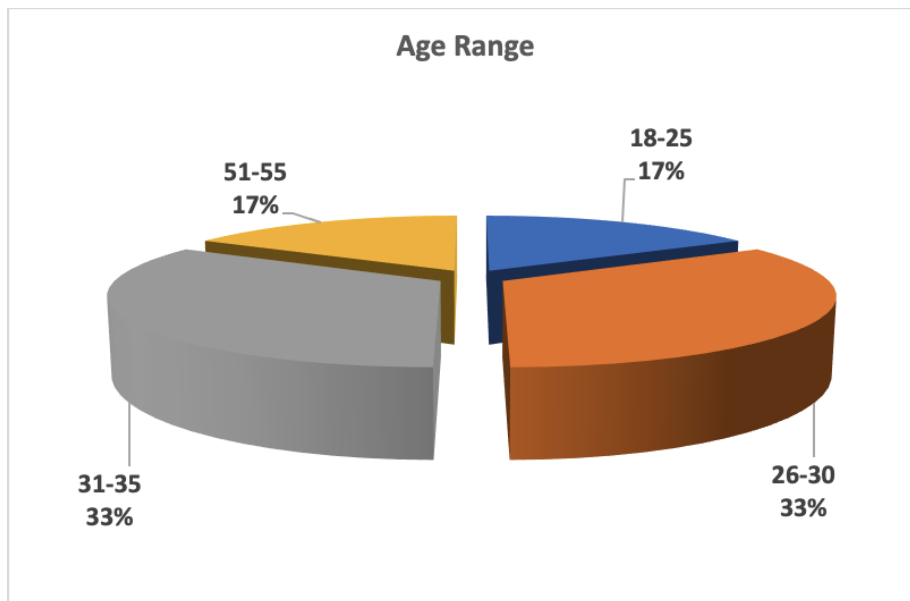
Qualitative response: Artistic practice
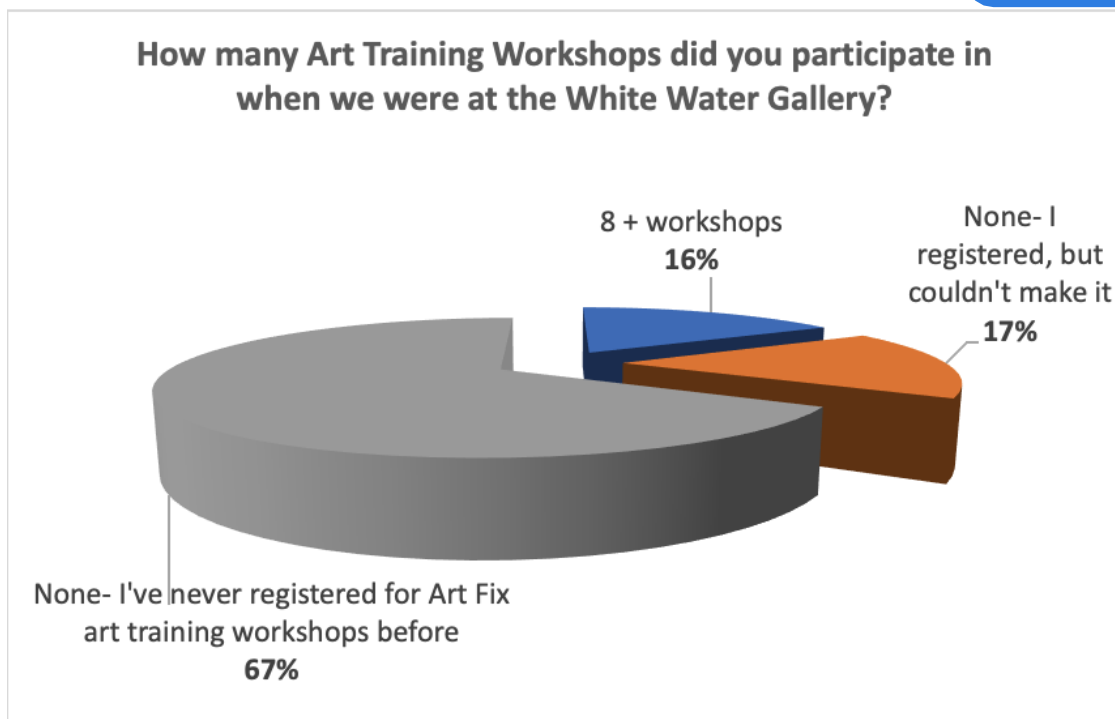Participants were asked to describe their current artistic practice.

- Painting, dancing, poetry.
- Multimedia, but mainly visual arts.
- Drawing and a little bit of poems. I illustrate my drawing into a poem
- Sketching and painting … crafts.
- Mixed – painting/poetry.
- Painting, beading, and crafts.

Participants were asked whether and how they had previously interacted with Art Fix programming.
Distribution of total respondents' selection of one category.
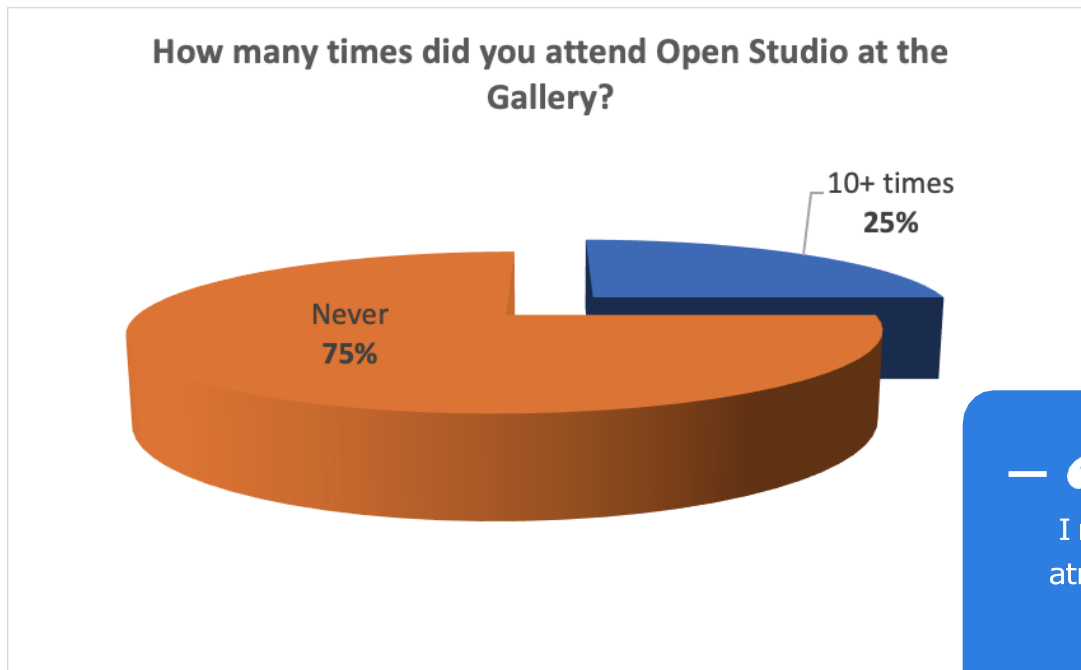
How many times did you attend Open Studio at the Gallery?

10+ times
25%

Never
75%

> " I really enjoyed the atmosphere because I felt I could be myself without suffering from any judgement or social stigma. "

How many Art Training Workshops did you participate in when we were at the White Water Gallery?

8 + workshops
16%

None- I registered, but couldn't make it
17%

None- I've never registered for Art Fix art training workshops before
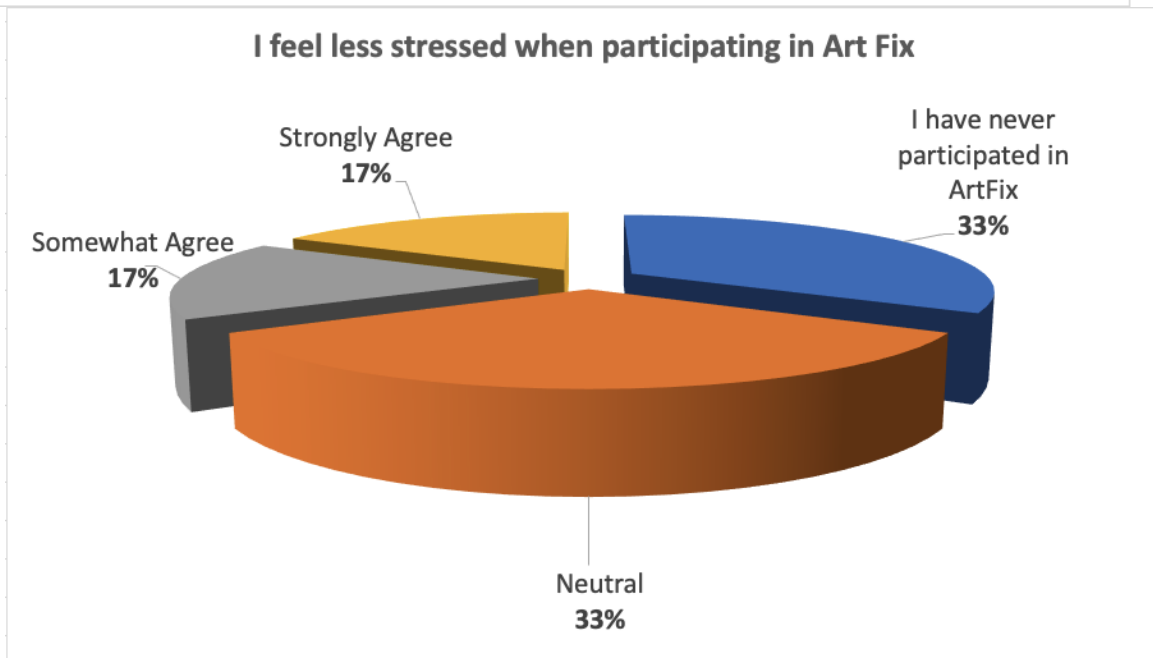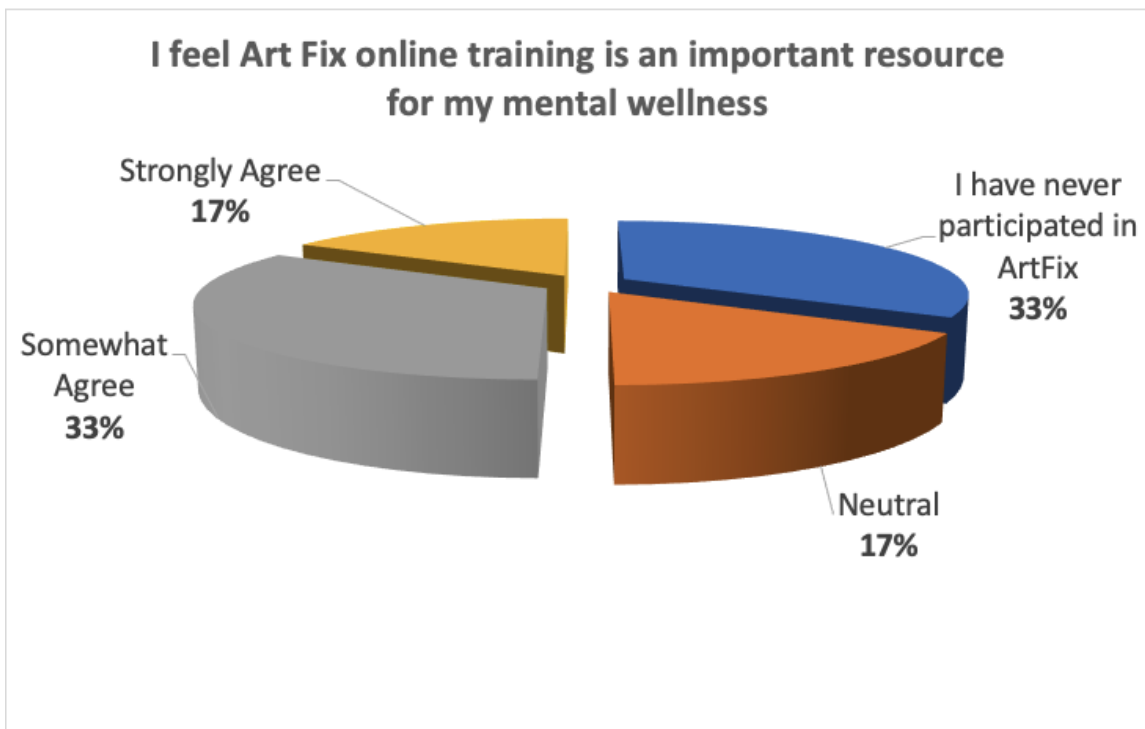**67%**

2.2 Art Programming and mental wellness

Participants were asked to respond to several questions about the impact of Art Fix programming, and the arts in general, on their mental wellness and feelings of community connectedness.

Figure 10: Impact of Art Fix programming on mental wellness

Distribution of total respondents' selection of one category. Participants were asked to characterize the impact of Art Fix programming on their mental wellness.

I feel Art Fix online training is an important resource for my mental wellness

- Strongly Agree 17%
- Somewhat Agree 33%
- I have never participated in ArtFix 33%
- Neutral 17%

I feel less stressed when participating in Art Fix

- Strongly Agree 17%
- Somewhat Agree 17%
- I have never participated in ArtFix 33%
- Neutral 33%

I feel my happiest when I participate in Art Fix

Strongly Agree
17%

Somewhat Agree
17%

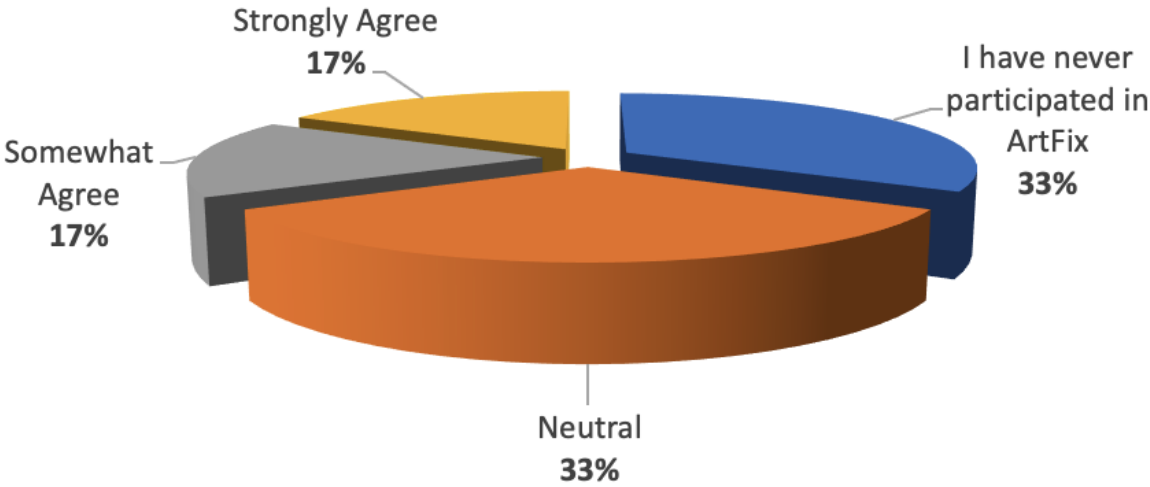I have never participated in ArtFix
33%

Neutral
33%

Figure 11: Art Fix participation and social connectedness
Distribution of total respondents' selection of one category. Participants were asked to characterize the impact of Art Fix programming on their feelings of social connectedness.

I feel more socially connected after participating in Art Fix training
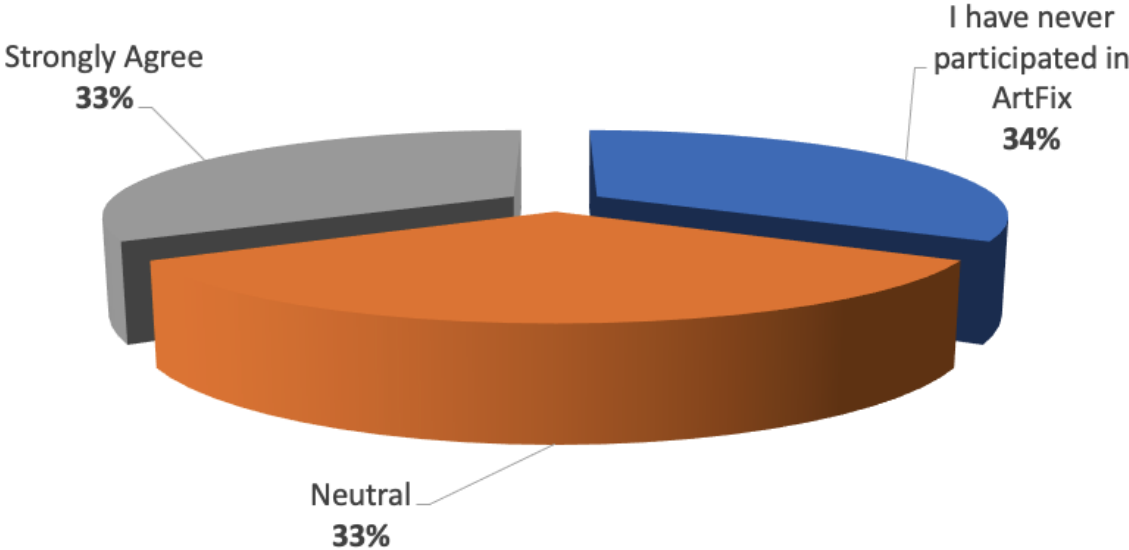
Strongly Agree
33%

I have never participated in ArtFix
34%

Neutral
33%

Survey participants were asked to elaborate on the impact that Art Fix programming OR the arts in general have on their mental wellness and social connectedness.

Responses re: prior Art Fix engagement:

- I really enjoyed the atmosphere because i felt i could be myself without suffering from any judgement or social stigma. Very welcoming and easy going. I could create with others without being criticized.
- I didn't feel like I was alone in this journey.

Respondents re: the impact of the arts in general:

- It's important for mental health to express ourselves.
- I felt positive after I'd done my artwork. Like the outcome of it.
- Art gives me that space away from everyday anxieties. It gives balance when so isolated.
- I think art is a great outlet for emotions, and especially during the pandemic when mental health access is limited - it helps. It gives us a way to express our feelings for others.
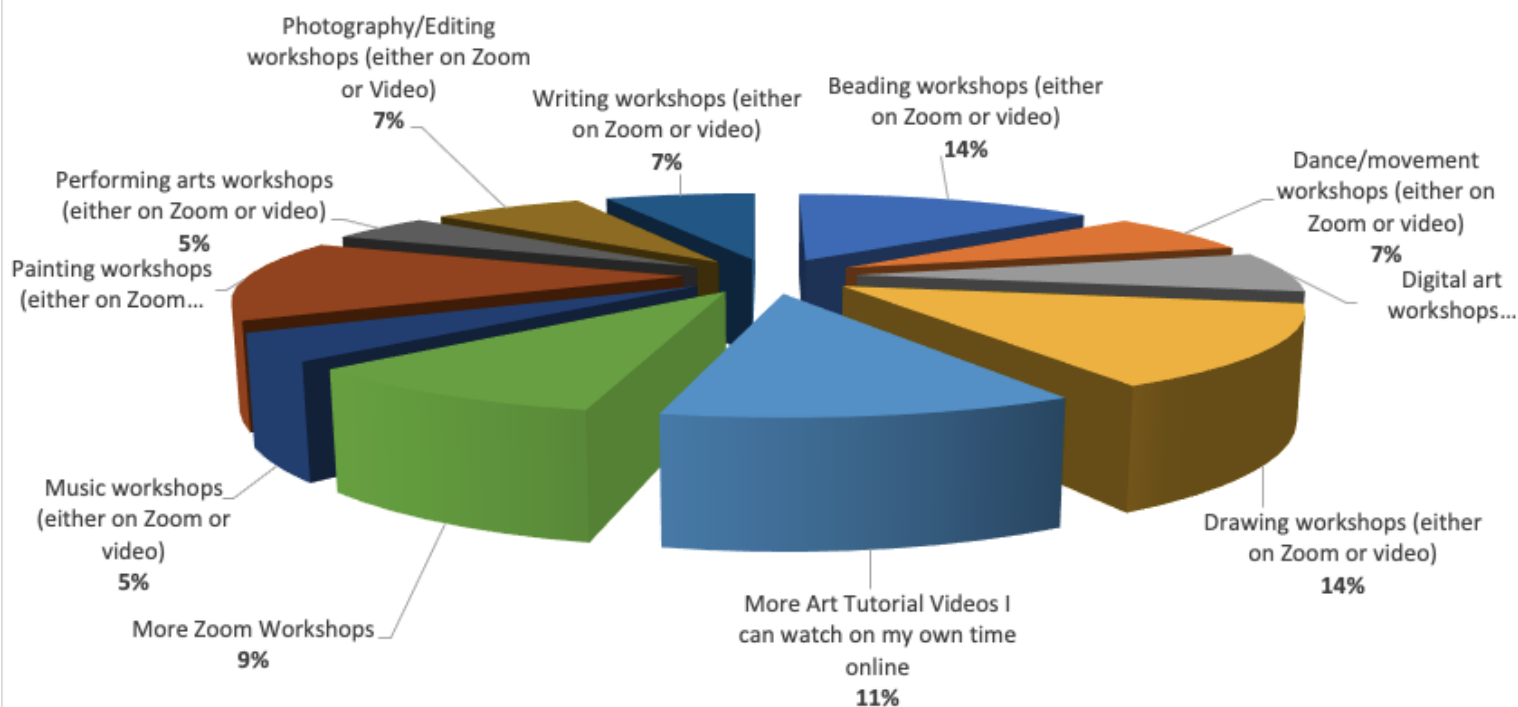

2.3 Evaluating programming offerings and delivery

Participants were asked to provide feedback regarding the programming which would be most accessible and meaningful to them in the future. They spoke to their preferences regarding specific program offerings in the future, online and hybrid programming methods, and barriers to accessibility they encounter.

Figure 12. Feedback: Program offerings
Distribution of total respondents' selection of multiple categories. Participants were asked to identify the program offerings they would prefer in the future.

What kind of art programming would you like to see?

- Photography/Editing workshops (either on Zoom or Video) 7%
- Writing workshops (either on Zoom or video) 7%
- Beading workshops (either on Zoom or video) 14%
- Dance/movement workshops (either on Zoom or video) 7%
- Digital art workshops...
- Performing arts workshops (either on Zoom or video) 5%
- Painting workshops (either on Zoom...
- Drawing workshops (either on Zoom or video) 14%
- Music workshops (either on Zoom or video) 5%
- More Zoom Workshops 9%
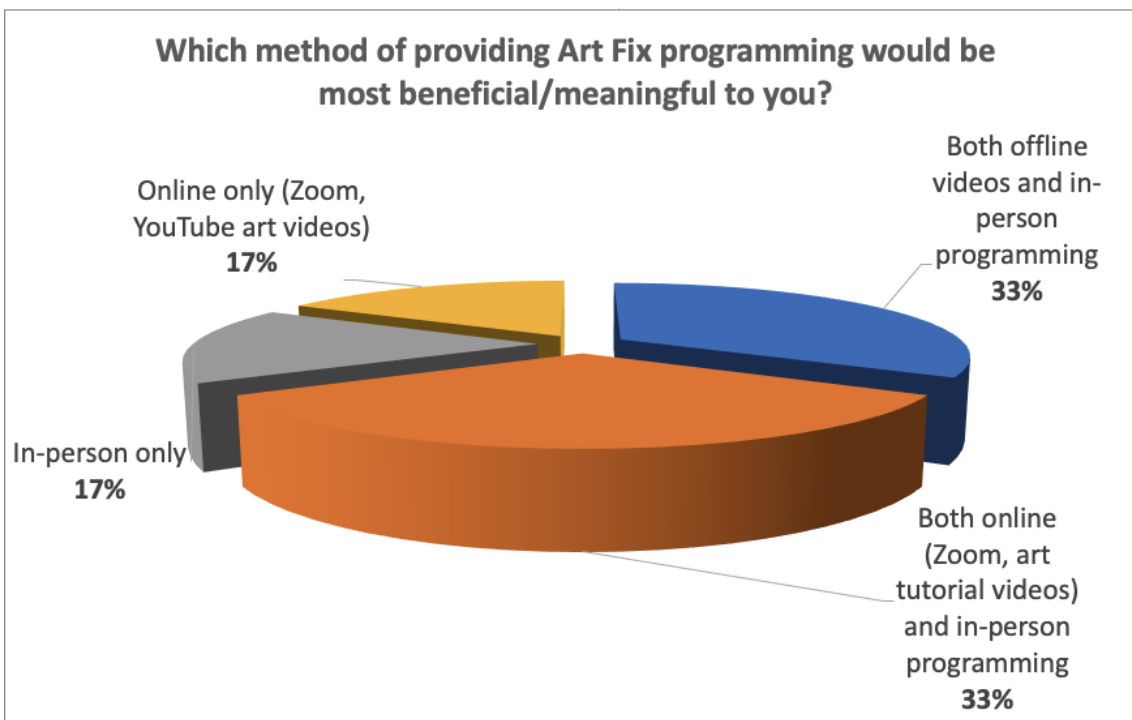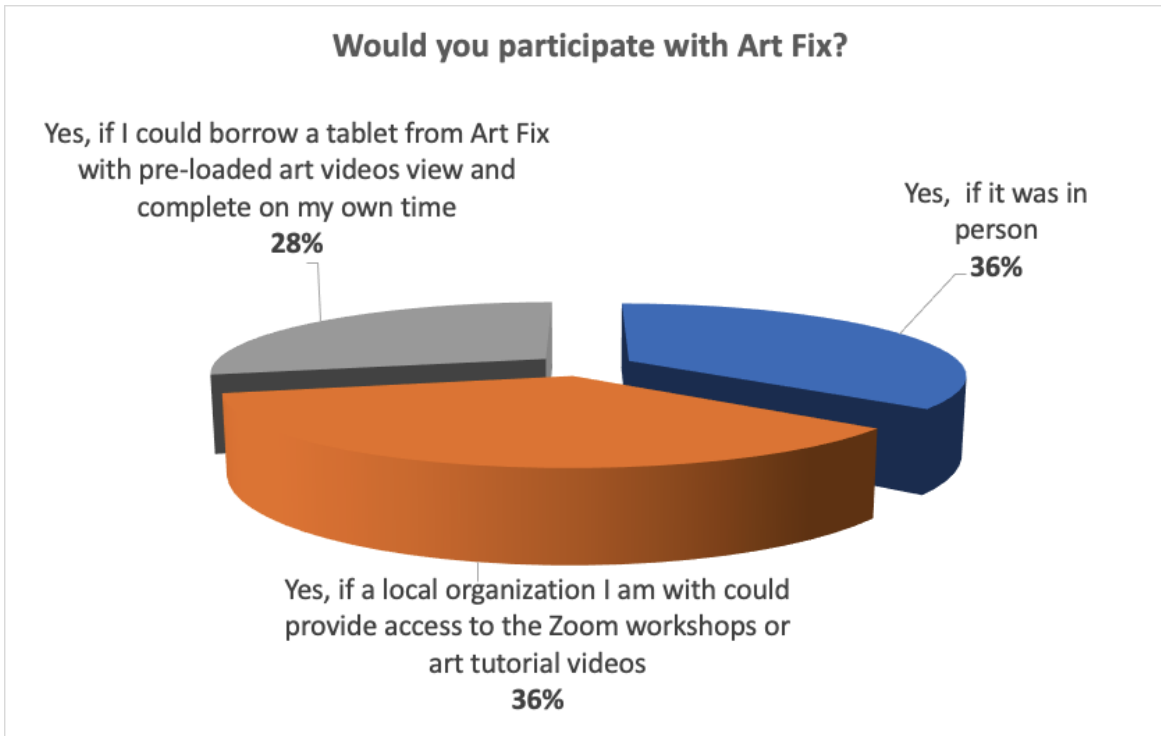- More Art Tutorial Videos I can watch on my own time online 11%

Qualitative response: Art programming and workshops
Participants were asked what other art workshops they would love to see at Art Fix.
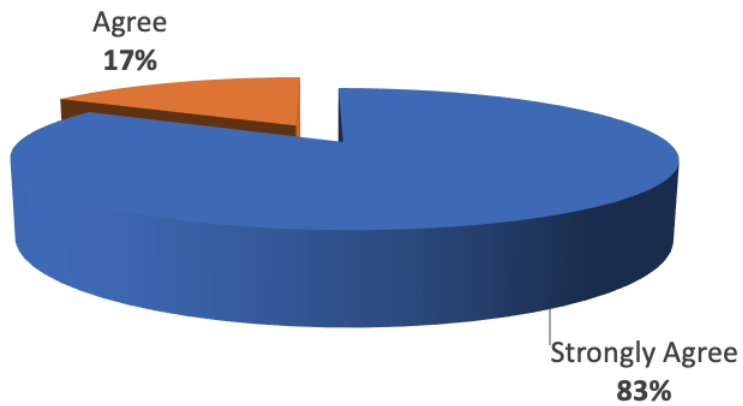
- Painting, dancing, poetry.
- Multimedia, but mainly visual arts.
- Drawing and a little bit of poems. I illustrate my drawing into a poem
- Sketching and painting ... crafts.
- Mixed – painting/poetry.
- Painting, beading, and crafts.

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Participants provided specific feedback regarding the methods of programming delivery that would best support their artistic practice and meet their accessibility needs Each chart indicates the distribution of participants' selection of one category. We learned that hybrid and digital programming are the overwhelming preference for members of the general public.


Would you participate with Art Fix?

- Yes, if I could borrow a tablet from Art Fix with pre-loaded art videos view and complete on my own time **28%**
- Yes, if it was in person **36%**
- Yes, if a local organization I am with could provide access to the Zoom workshops or art tutorial videos **36%**

Which method of providing Art Fix programming would be most beneficial/meaningful to you?

- Online only (Zoom, YouTube art videos) **17%**
- Both offline videos and in-person programming **33%**
- In-person only **17%**
- Both online (Zoom, art tutorial videos) and in-person programming **33%**

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I would appreciated having more art tutorial videos that I could watch on my own time.

Agree
17%

Strongly Agree
83%

Being offered a choice to borrow iPads so I could take art training with me on the go or if I don't have internet would be great.

Strongly Agree
50%

Agree
33%

Not applicable to me
17%
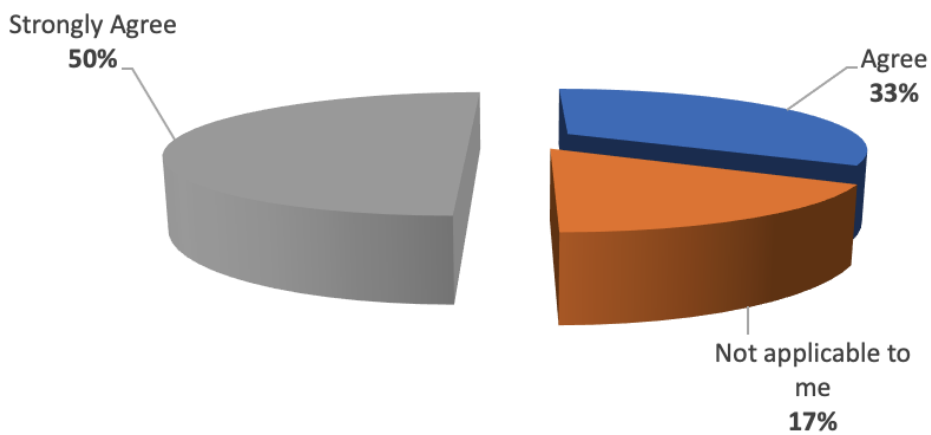
Would you be interested in having Art Tutorial videos sent to you to watch on your own time?

Some but not all
17%

Yes
83%
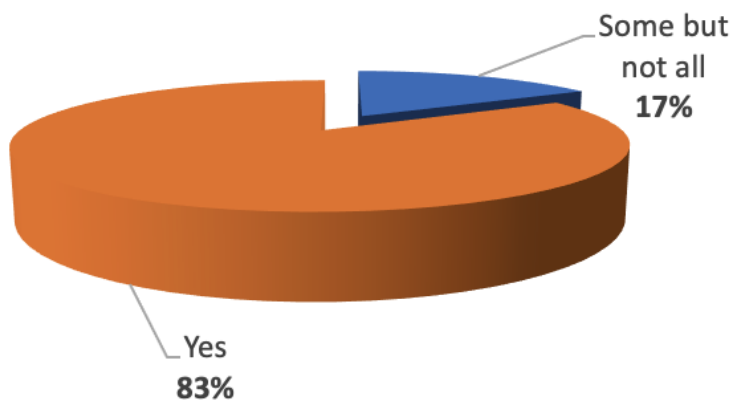
Qualitative response: Programming delivery and future participation

Participants were asked to share more about the reasons that they would or would not participate in Art Fix programming in the future.

- These [workshops] sound amazing.
- It all depends on if the topic interests me and if i am mentally feeling up to doing something that day.
- I would participate in Art Fix in the future it's part of my hobby like it's me. It's something that I do all the time if I don't want to stay at home it's somewhere to go like White Water Gallery or Art Fix. It's just something to go to if you're stuck in the house and just want to go somewhere.
- It's hard from the beginning, like to login to the computer and stuff, and it's discouraging because of the camera part because of the pandemic. We're all new to this and something we have to get used to functioning and will get easier. (That's the computer stuff).
- I've been looking for these services but only became aware of Art Fix recently
- It's nice to have a creative outlet and so I think that I'd like to learn how to better myself in this area, while being home.
- Seems like a great program! Can't wait to participate.

Qualitative response: Programming delivery and accessibility

Participants were asked to share more about any barriers to accessibility that they've encountered or anticipate when accessing programming.

- More awareness, sponsorships on active media platforms.
- Have not participated in the online classes so unsure of improvements that could be made.
- Maybe online business card or phone number. Help you walk you through the computer or tablet. Help you access your email or camera for the program for the white water gallery or art fix.
- More advertising for sure.
- I am new to this and wanting to join, so I don't have a lot of input from previous experience, but I believe that a huge helpful part is using a phone stand if using a cellphone. I've been in other art workshops where you can't see well from the camera angle.
- Online workshops and gallery.

- Timing- I have 5 kids so I require offline videos.
- Not that I can think of. I have not participated in the online programming due to other personal and work responsibilities, not anything to do with how Art Fix was operating.
- [Art Fix staff/volunteers] helping me access to the computer helping me to login to where I need to login.
- It's just more access to the computer that I have trouble with I think. Like say if you send me an email where do I need to access a log.
- Transportation's okay.
- Having a phone number [for an Art Fix staff person/volunteer] and walk them through the computer for a camera or email or something until I'm good at what I'm supposed to be doing so everything will be easier. First it will be complicated and that, but then it will get easier.
- Crafting workshops using things from natural world. Wood, stones, etc.
- For myself I believe online would be the best, as I have a 9 month old son and am a single mother. With the pandemic it just isn't worth it for myself to risk him, and honestly the online part has made access for so many workshops much much easier from home.

> "Storytelling" – peoples' Stories of their mental illness. What their inspiring story is to keep going. If they want to do a painting of themselves, a drawing or a project like a fantasy room where you're in a perfect bedroom that you thought it was.

3. Art Fix Community Partner Survey

3.1 Participant demographics and involvement

We received responses from individuals associated with the following community partners, who provided feedback regarding Art Fix programming and the individual artists and community members with whom they interact.
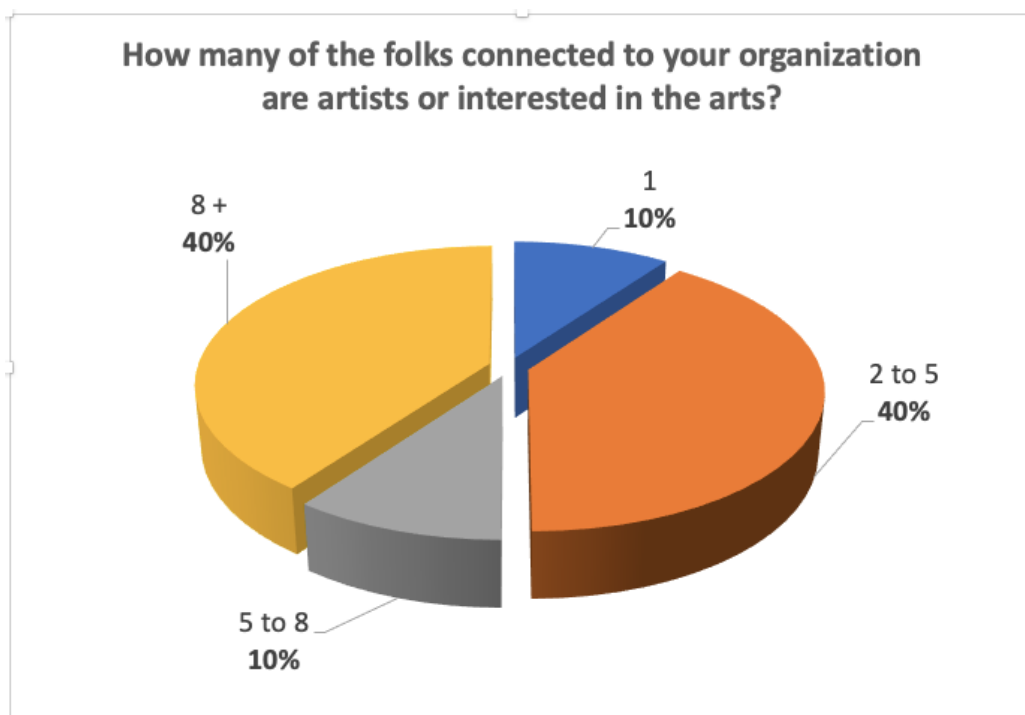
<div style="float:right; border:1px solid #ccc; padding:1em; text-align:center;">

6

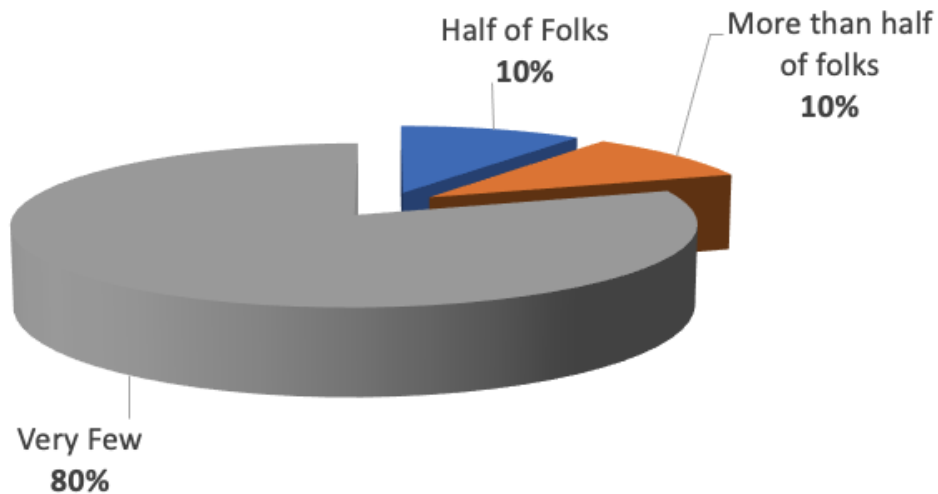Community partner organizations represented

</div>

- Nipissing First Nation – Ojibway Women's Lodge
- Nipissing Mental Health Housing & Support Services (NMHHSS)
- North Bay Indigenous Friendship Centre
- North Bay Jail
- North Bay Regional Health Centre (NBRHC)
- The PADDLE Program (Providing Adults with Developmental Disabilities Lifelong Experiences)

## Figure 14: Programming demand and accessibility

We learned 1) that there is a high degree of interest in the arts amongst individual community members who work with these organizations, and 2) that they face significant barriers to accessibility. Distribution of total respondents' selection of one category.

How many of the folks connected to your organization are artists or interested in the arts?

- 1 — 10%
- 2 to 5 — 40%
- 5 to 8 — 10%
- 8 + — 40%

Approximately how many folks who you work with at your organization have access to a car or reliable public transportation?

Half of Folks
10%

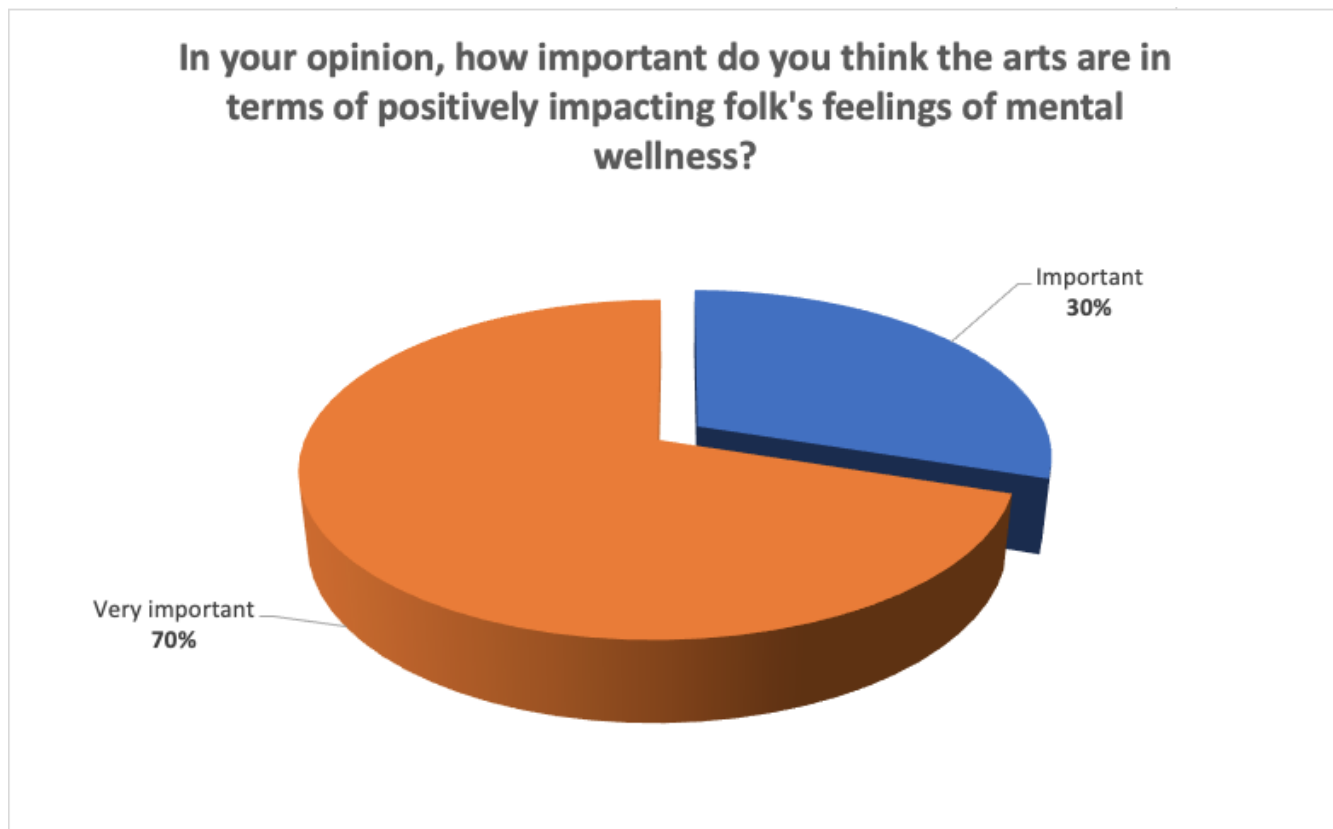More than half of folks
10%

Very Few
80%

Out of the folks who you work with at your organization, how many would you estimate have reliable internet access?

Very few
50%

Half of folks
30%

More than half of folks
10%

None
10%

33
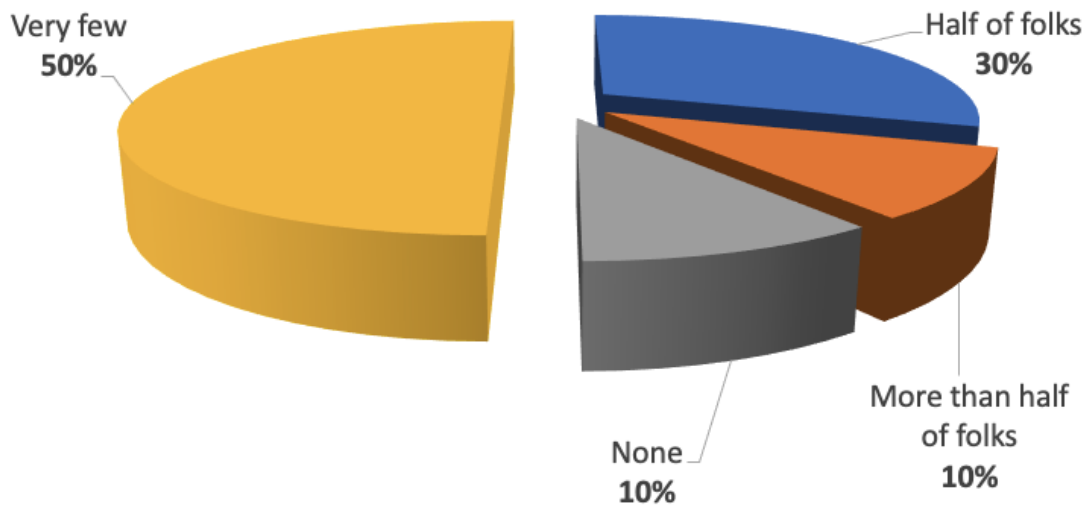
3.2 Art Programming and mental wellness

Community partners were asked to reflect on the role and importance of the arts for positively impacting mental wellness.

Figure 15: Impact of the arts on individual mental wellness

In your opinion, how important do you think the arts are in terms of positively impacting folk's feelings of mental wellness?

Important 30%

Very important 70%

> " Art creates a space for individuals to express themselves, connect with others, and be a part of a community. Too often I see people feel like they cannot speak up for themselves in a medical setting, are socially isolated, and feel unable to contribute to a community. Art turns all of that upside down and breaks down the barriers/stigma of mental health. "

Qualitative responses

Survey participants were asked to elaborate on the impact that Art Fix programming or the arts in general have on their clients' mental wellness and social connectedness.

- When people have an outlet for expression, in whatever form fits them best, they tend to feel better. Often people use art as a meditative practice which we promote as a way to either detach from intense feelings or as a way to be mindful. Creativity sparks growth and can allow for a sense of belonging in a world that often judges and even denies the illness and struggles of those who struggle with mental health. Also, belonging is a key characteristic for mental health and really for everyone. Isolation is a big piece to mental health and art can be a way to bring like-minded people together.
- Supports clients: expression, reflection, processing, community building, confidence, mastery and self-esteem.
- Providing an outlet for their emotions and inner conflicts.
- Art creates a space for individuals to express themselves, connect with others, and be a part of a community. Too often I see people feel like they cannot speak up for themselves in a medical setting, are socially isolated, and feel unable to contribute to a community. Art turns all of that upside down and breaks down the barriers/stigma of mental health.
- Keep the mind busy and soothing.
- I believe that it is a factor however different factors play a role for each individual.
- Art is a form of an outlet for people. Are allows individuals to express themselves and their feelings.
- Meaningful activity. Pro social networking. Improved sense of self.
- I think that arts are very important for folk's mental health. Arts are a big part of how people express themselves, and they can contribute to positive self-esteem and sense of identity. As well, art allows a common ground for people to connect with their peers.
- At our program we focus on holistic, client led learning. I have seen first-hand how the arts positively impacts our clients with relaxation, confidence and sense of purpose.
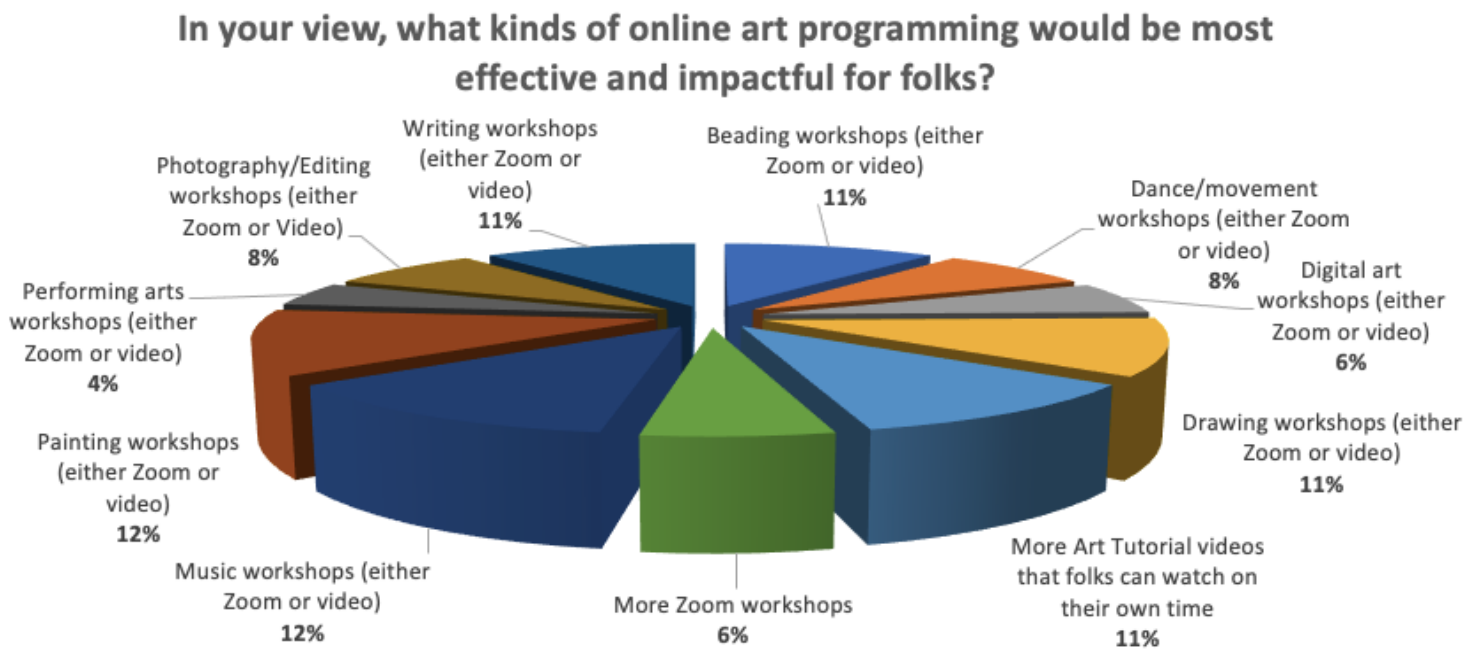
3.3 Evaluating programming offerings and delivery

Participants were asked to provide feedback regarding the programming which would be most accessible and meaningful to them in the future. They spoke to their preferences regarding specific program offerings in the future, online and hybrid programming methods, and barriers to accessibility they encounter.

Figure 12. Feedback: Program offerings
Distribution of total respondents' selection of multiple categories. Participants were asked to identify the program offerings that would be most impactful in the future.

In your view, what kinds of online art programming would be most effective and impactful for folks?

- Writing workshops (either Zoom or video) 11%
- Photography/Editing workshops (either Zoom or Video) 8%
- Performing arts workshops (either Zoom or video) 4%
- Painting workshops (either Zoom or video) 12%
- Music workshops (either Zoom or video) 12%
- More Zoom workshops 6%
- More Art Tutorial videos that folks can watch on their own time 11%
- Drawing workshops (either Zoom or video) 11%
- Digital art workshops (either Zoom or video) 6%
- Dance/movement workshops (either Zoom or video) 8%
- Beading workshops (either Zoom or video) 11%

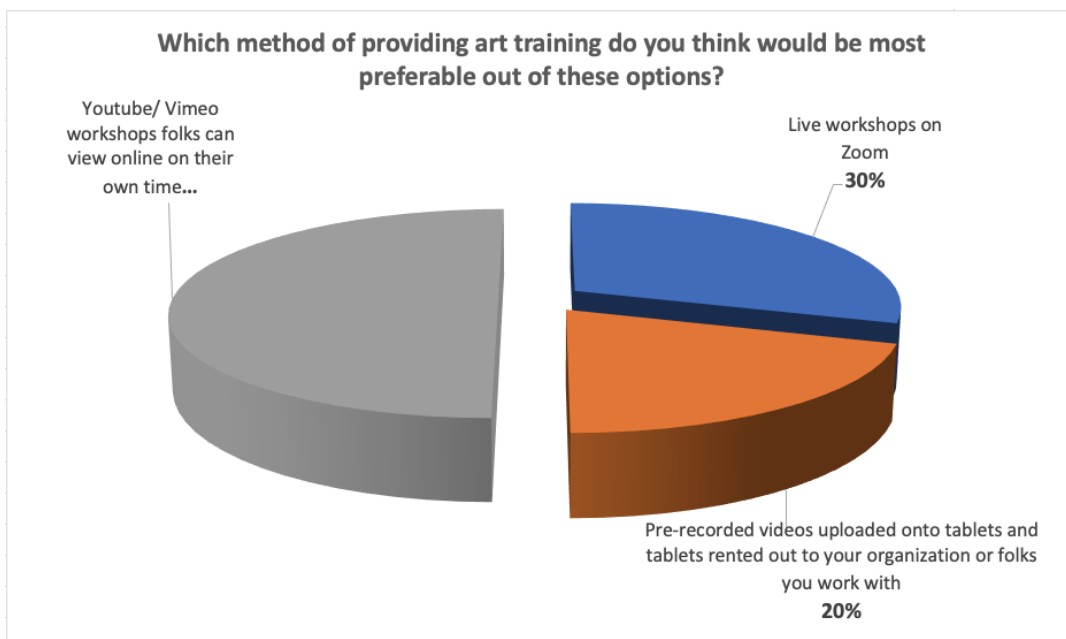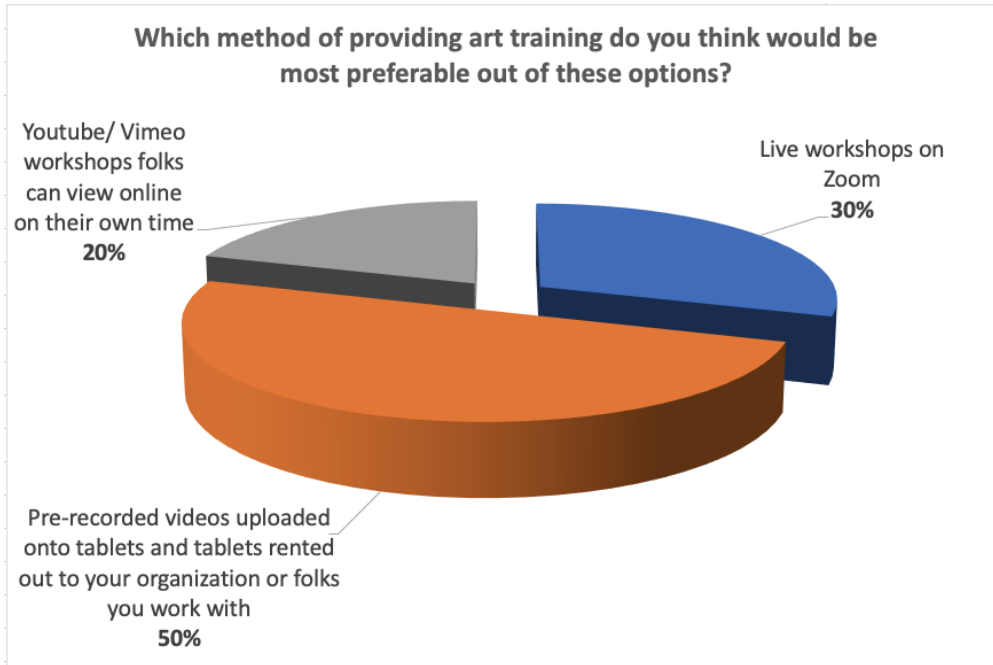### Qualitative response: Art programming and workshops
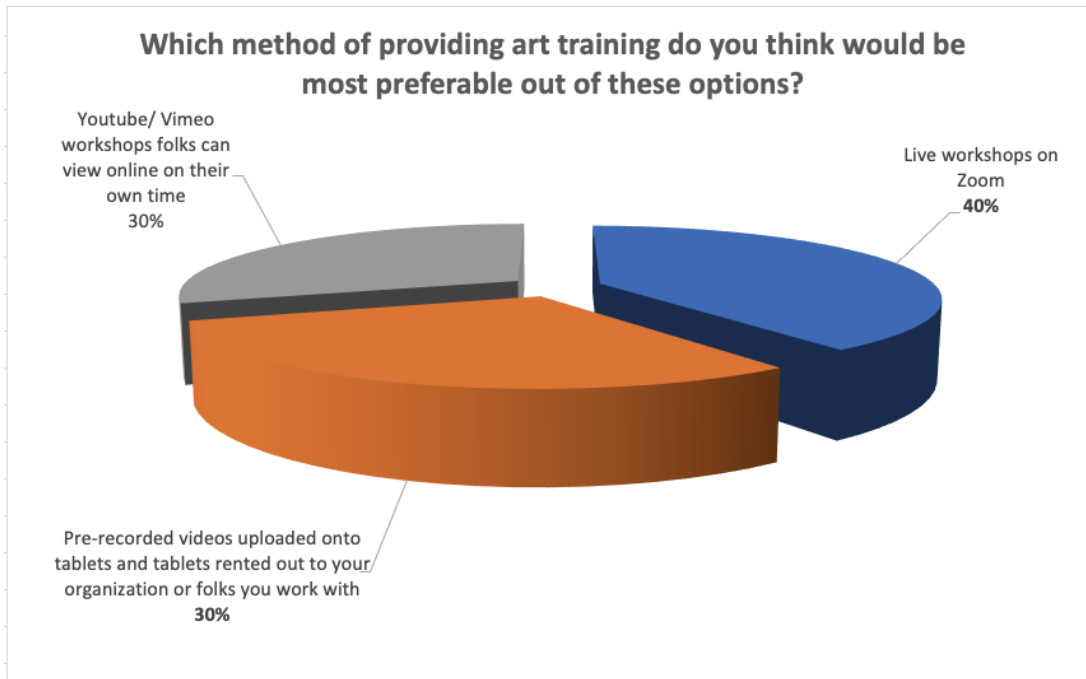Participants were asked what other art workshops they would love to see at Art Fix.

- Perhaps meditative arts.
- Clay or sculpture.
- Traditional art, moccasin making.
- Unsure – you provide a great selection to choose from.
- Above seems to be an extensive list.
- Folks would love tattoo artistry, including traditional Indigenous tattooing.

Participants provided specific feedback regarding the methods of digital programming delivery that would best support the artistic practices and accessibility needs of their clients. Each chart indicates the distribution of participants' selection of one category. These charts indicate participants' ranked preferences for:

1) Pre-recorded videos uploaded to tablets and provided to partner organizations.

2) YouTube/Vimeo workshops.

3) Live workshops on Zoom.

Which method of providing art training do you think would be most preferable out of these options?

Youtube/ Vimeo workshops folks can view online on their own time
20%

Live workshops on Zoom
30%

Pre-recorded videos uploaded onto tablets and tablets rented out to your organization or folks you work with
50%

Which method of providing art training do you think would be most preferable out of these options?

Youtube/ Vimeo workshops folks can view online on their own time...

Live workshops on Zoom
30%

Pre-recorded videos uploaded onto tablets and tablets rented out to your organization or folks you work with
20%

Which method of providing art training do you think would be most preferable out of these options?

- Youtube/ Vimeo workshops folks can view online on their own time — 30%
- Live workshops on Zoom — 40%
- Pre-recorded videos uploaded onto tablets and tablets rented out to your organization or folks you work with — 30%

Qualitative response: Hybrid/digital programming options
Participants were asked to provide more detail about how Art Fix could best offer art training/art making opportunities to folks connected to their organizations.

- Possibly having someone come into the clinic from time to time and engage with clients. Covid-19 makes that difficult though.
- Attend one of our group sessions to discuss your services and connecting.
- By advertising/posters/etc. at the clinic that provides information and contact info.
- Keep finding creative ways to connect with those individuals who are hard to reach due to internet, or isolation.
- The workers are more than happy to be a bridge to potential clients
- Offering iPad usage to individuals isolated in their homes that have pre-programmed tutorials is amazing. Accessing online classes would be fantastic.
- Connecting with folks in custody during COVID-19 has been quite difficult, as Art Fix has some great online solutions, however, with the bulk of court appearances taking place by audio/video from the jail, this has occupied the bulk of available internet at the jail. Longer term we hope to be able to access some of the digital solutions you already have in place. Other than that, we would love to host in-person on-site opportunities.
- I would love more access to already made videos that we can offer during our PADDLE hours. ZOOM sessions are great as well
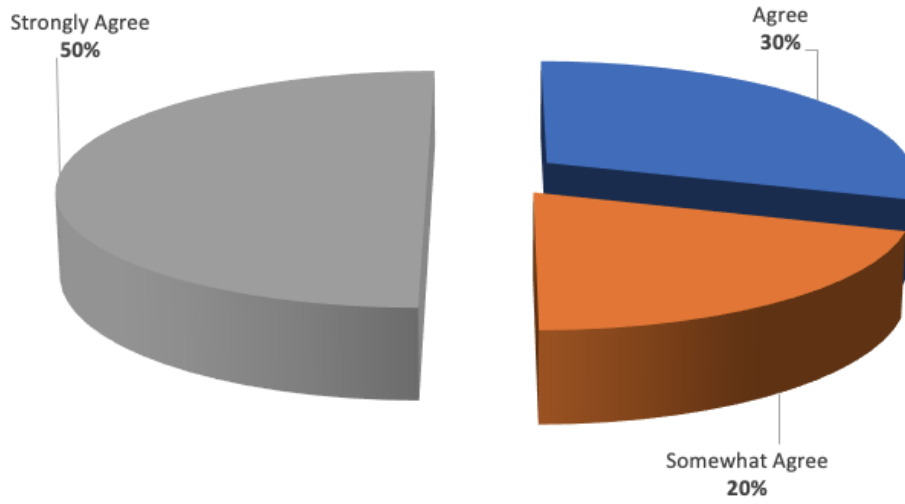
Participants provided specific feedback regarding the accessibility of a variety of programming delivery options. Each chart indicates the distribution of participants' selection of one category. These charts indicate participants' ranked preferences for:
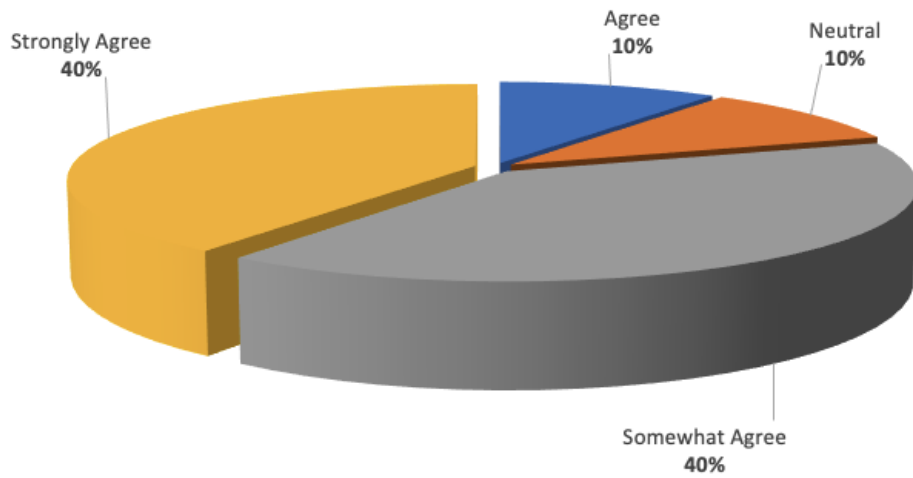
1) Pre-recorded videos uploaded to tablets and provided to partner organizations.

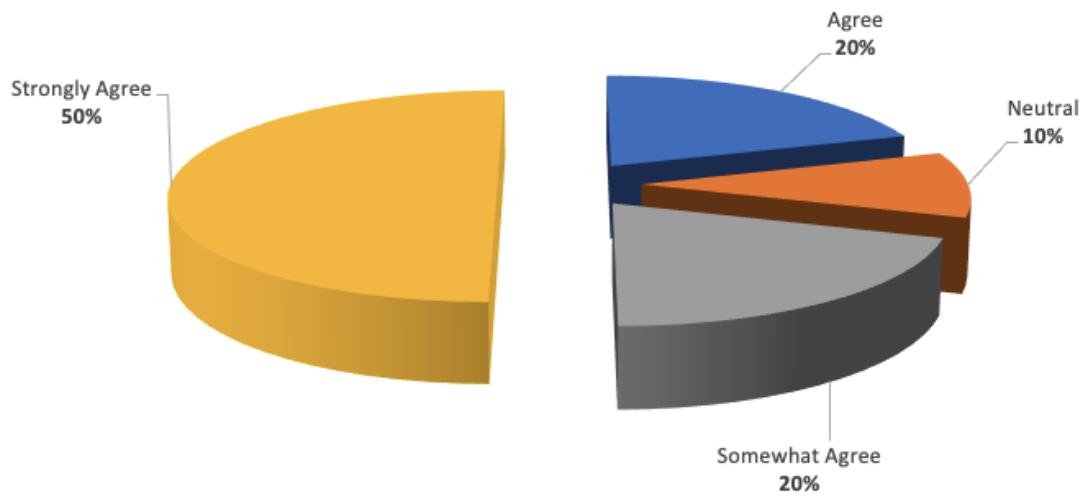2) YouTube/Vimeo workshops.

3) Live workshops on Zoom.

Rentable iPads pre-loaded with art training videos already uploaded on a device that I could use in a group or loan to individuals

- Agree 20%
- Somewhat Agree 20%
- Strongly Agree 60%

Art Training Zoom Workshops

- Agree 30%
- Somewhat Agree 10%
- Strongly Agree 60%

Outdoor Art Training Workshops

Strongly Agree
50%

Agree
30%

Somewhat Agree
20%

Onsite art workshops

Strongly Agree
40%

Agree
10%

Neutral
10%

Somewhat Agree
40%
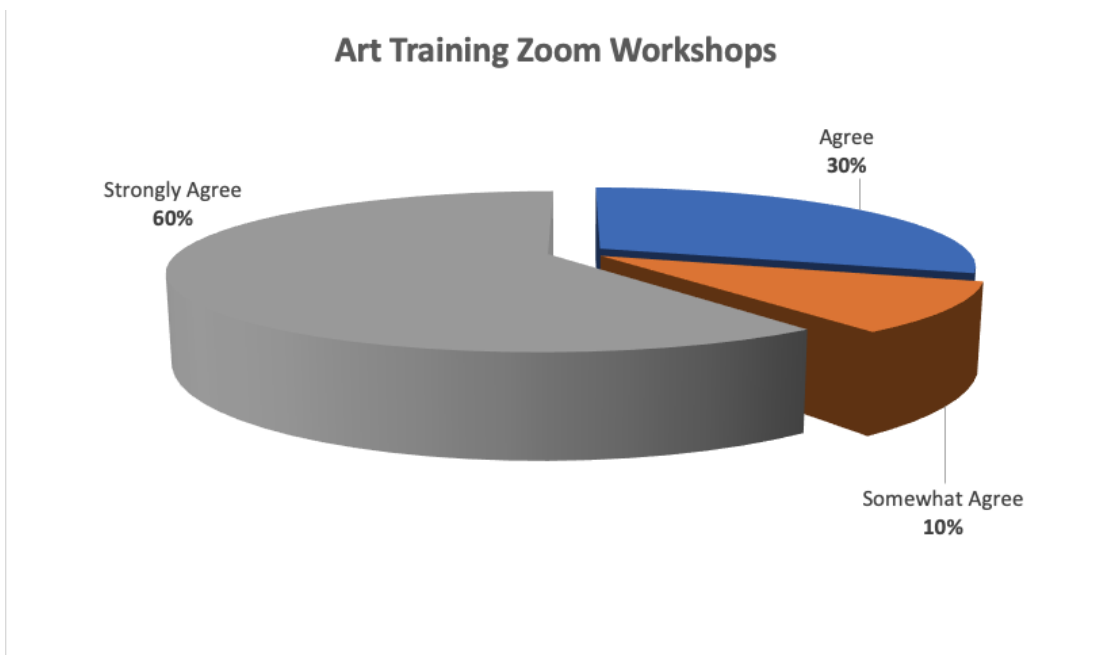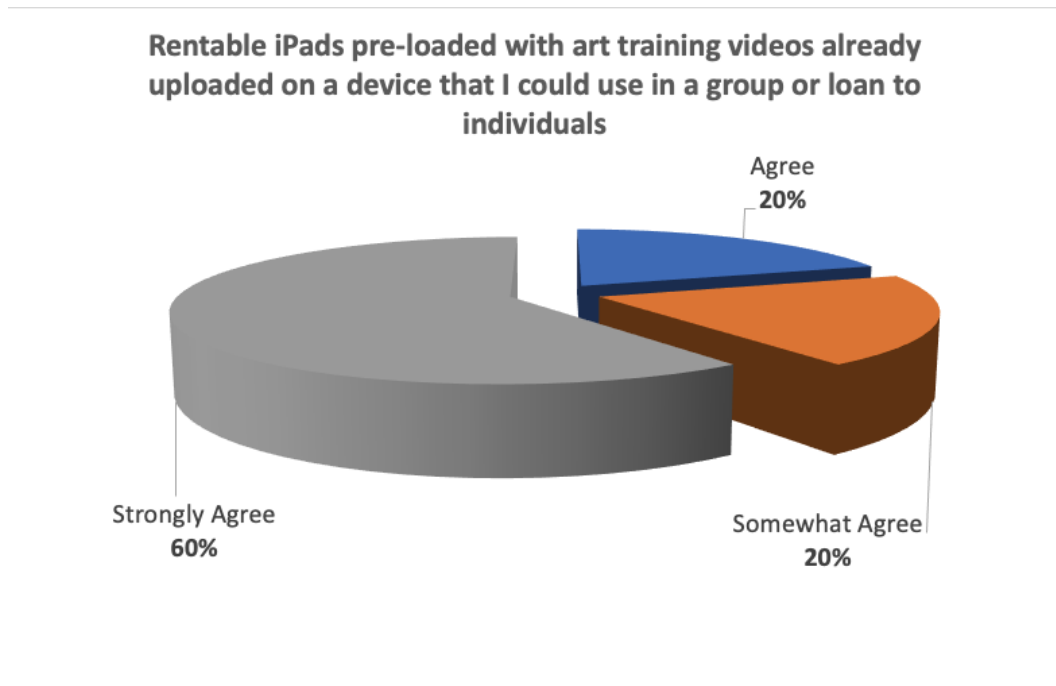
One-to-one art mentorship offered online

Strongly Agree 50%
Agree 20%
Neutral 10%
Somewhat Agree 20%

Qualitative response: Programming delivery and accessibility

Participants were asked share more about how Art Fix could evolve its programming to be more accessible to folks connected to their organizations.

- Not everyone has access to the internet and may struggle with being able to use devices, perhaps in person, masks, distance.
- Community art project (allowing clients to take turns' working on one large art piece)
- Peer mentorship program that could help keep each other motivated.
- Making supplies easily accessible
- Not sure at this time. I feel like you have most bases covered in making it accessible to everyone.
- Continuing to provide free access to art supplies.
- More times – perhaps LIVE and ON DEMAND classes.

CONCLUSION

This research project offered three key takeaways for Art Fix, as we continue to evolve our programming offerings and approaches to delivery:

1   **Mental wellness.** Amongst all three stakeholder groups, we learned that participation in Art Fix's programming – and engagement with the arts in general – has an unambiguous positive impact on participants' mental wellness and sense of community connection, as borne out by quantitative and qualitative data.

2   **Hybrid programming and accessibility.** Hybrid programming will be a core method for delivering programming moving forward. Although we originally evolved hybrid and digital programming in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, we have learned that "accessible programming" does not correspond with digital-only or in-person-only programming. Instead, we have learned that offering a diverse range of hybrid programming is not only practical, but accessible.

In particular, we have learned that digital/hybrid programming enhances our accessibility for artists who face barriers due to time constraints and care-giving obligations; artists with mobility challenges which preclude in-person programming; and artists in communal living situations, with limited access to the internet.

3   **Community-responsive programming delivery.** Finally, the feedback we received from community partner organizations indicated a strong interest in tablet-based digital programming that does not require internet access. This contrasts strongly with responses from current Art Fix collective members, and members of the public. Although many community members were open to tablet-based programming, it did not address a concrete need for those with consistent internet access preferred to access programming in-person, via live Zoom workshops, or through videos uploaded to YouTube or Vimeo.

However, many respondents encouraged us to develop tablet-based programming, sharing that 'it might not meet my needs, but I can see how it would help someone else.' As we look to the future, we have learned that accessibility means offering diverse programming through delivery methods which are tailored to the specific access constraints facing our communities.

Art Fix of Nipissing and the report preparators acknowledge the lands on which we gather. They include the traditional territory of Nipissing First Nation of the Anishinaabeg People, within lands covered by the Robinson Huron Treaty of 1850; and the traditional territory of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit, within lands covered by Treaty 13 and the Williams Treaties. These lands are home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. We are grateful to live and work on this land.

We would like to gratefully thank the community partners, Art Fix participants, and members of the broader North Bay/Nipissing community who generously supported and participated in this research.

@ArtFixNipissing