



YGK ARTS ROUNDTABLES

APRIL 2020

SUMMARY

Prepared by Kirsi Hunnako, Executive Director

In April 2020, the Kingston Arts Council (KAC) facilitated five online roundtables with its arts community in response to the COVID-19 public health crisis. The goals of this initiative were to:

- Reconnect with the arts community as a support organization and granting body;
- Reconnect artists and arts workers to their professional network;
- Gather information around what the arts community needs from the Kingston Arts Council;
- Encourage support and partnerships for existing/new projects;
- Create a space of honesty, warmth and creativity; and
- Provide an opportunity to affirm and strengthen peer support.

Schedule and Facilitation

The five roundtables were each one hour in length and were scheduled as noted below. For each of the four discipline-specific roundtables, the KAC hired a local artist practicing in that discipline to co-facilitate the discussion with the KAC's Programming and Communications Coordinator, Laura Chaignon. The Arts Administrators roundtable was co-facilitated by Laura with KAC Executive Director, Kirsi Hunnako. The roundtables were conducted using Zoom and were not recorded, however notes were taken by KAC staff and provided to the attendees and other interested parties a few days following each event.

Roundtable 1: Arts administrators - Friday 3 April, 11am to 12pm

Roundtable 2: Music community - Tuesday 7 April, 2:30-3:30pm (Co-facilitator Megan Hamilton)

Roundtable 3: Performance arts - Thursday 9 April, 2:30-3:30pm (Co-facilitator Tracey Guptill)

Roundtable 4: Visual arts - Tuesday 14 April, 2:30-3:30pm (Co-facilitator Danielle Folkerts)

Roundtable 5: Literary arts - Thursday 16 April, 2:30-3:30pm (Co-facilitator Sadiqa de Meijer)

Promotion and Attendance

With the exception of the arts administrators roundtable which was invitation-only via email, the roundtables were promoted through the KAC's social media channels and website as well as through targeted emails to known artists in each discipline. Anybody who self-identified with an involvement or interest in a particular discipline was welcome to participate.

Excluding KAC staff members, forty-three attendees participated in the five roundtables, with the Visual Arts and Performing Arts roundtables having the largest attendance at fifteen and eleven respectively. The Music roundtable welcomed six participants while the Arts Administrators roundtable was attended by six local arts workers. The Literary Arts roundtable had the smallest attendance at only three participants.

Roundtable Discussion Questions

The co-facilitators led each roundtable through a discussion of four central questions:

1. What are the greatest challenges you and/or your organization are facing as a result of the COVID-19 public health crisis?
2. How are you continuing to create and/or connect with your audiences and peers?
3. What resources have you found or created that you wish to share with others?
4. What further support do you need in order to manage through this challenging time?

What follows is a summary of the common responses and themes raised through the five roundtables. Specific examples have also been noted to give a sense of the variation of impact.

What are the greatest challenges you and/or your organization are facing as a result of the COVID-19 public health crisis?

Attendees raised a number of diverse challenges but there was commonality across all five roundtables in regards to the areas of greatest concern. These can be divided into short-term and long-term challenges:

Short-term Challenges

- Loss of income (individual) and revenue (organizations)
 - Many individual artists have lost gigs, residencies, book tours, exhibitions etc. in addition to supplementary employment (e.g. in the service industry); for musicians, royalty payments out of the U.S. are on hold
 - Organizations are facing a disruption to their fundraising (e.g. many hold fundraising events in the spring) and the loss of ticket sales, venue rentals, membership renewals and other forms of earned revenue, in addition to dealing with expenses incurred by cancelling events

As a result, individual artists and arts workers are understandably worried about their ability to pay their bills and continue a career in the arts. Many organizations are unsure about their ability to sustain their operations. However, in all five roundtables, a strong desire was expressed by organizations to find ways to continue to retain their staff and pay their artists.
- The difficulty of planning for the future (anticipating income/revenue and expenses, planning programming, etc.) when there is so much uncertainty
 - It was also noted that it is difficult to know what others are planning
- Challenges associated with moving activities online and monetizing this work
 - There is a multitude of online event/program offerings at the moment and some expressed difficulty in determining what they can offer that is unique and needed
 - Some art forms cannot shift in this way, e.g. tattoo arts
 - Some organizations have an older audience and donor base; many of their donors are unable to use online donation systems, and can't engage with online programming
- Concerns about technology

- Trying to get up and running online using technologies and platforms that are unfamiliar and daunting
- Many noted that there is inequity, as some are left behind due to a lack of digital literacy, high-speed internet, and/or a computer/device
- The available technologies are also not without their issues, e.g. lag time which impacts online music rehearsals

Long-term Challenges

- Continuation of government funding beyond this initial crisis period; there is a concern that the government at all levels will “forget” about the arts community
- There is great concern that a recession/depression will result in fewer individual and foundation donations to the arts for a long time
- It is expected that there will be anxiety in the community around gathering in crowded venues once bans have been lifted; it is anticipated that it will be some time before people are comfortable attending large-scale performances

How are you continuing to create and/or connect with your audiences and peers?

Artists and organizations are continuing to create and connect with their customers, members, audiences and peers in a variety of ways:

- Signal boosting for artists and initiatives through their social media and other communication channels
- Phone calls with supporters as a social check-in to offer support in return
- One-to-one conversations with stakeholders, staff, audience, contracted freelancers, etc.
- Online rehearsals and writing groups
- Developing a virtual artist’s residency
- Creating a digital publication of student art
- Continuing existing and creating new online programming, including Instagram Live events, digital concerts, studio visits, readings, exhibitions, a virtual orchestra, virtual classes and workshops
- Developing online programming with partners, e.g. the CFRC/Grad Club virtual trivia nights, Union/Modern Fuel online professional development workshops
- Making art kits for home delivery
- Diversifying creativity by exploring new mediums
- Donating artwork and services to fundraise for local charities
- Exploring the creation of an art exhibition using retail display windows or personal window space in Kingston neighbourhoods

In addition, many artists expressed that it is challenging to feel creative in the current circumstances. Participants described feeling “scattered” and having difficulty focusing and feeling motivated. Some also expressed concern about becoming insular and detached during this time of physical isolation. The impacts of the pandemic on mental health for those both within and outside of the arts community must be acknowledged. For those in the arts, the challenges described above add to the impact.

What resources have you found or created that you wish to share with others?

The resources shared were included in each roundtable summary - provided to the participants and other interested parties - as well as added to the [Kingston Arts Council's COVID-19 resources list](#) on our website.

What further support do you need in order to manage through this challenging time?

Participants identified a number of supports they are seeking. Common responses include the following:

- Stable funding both in the short- and long-term, including support to re-skill
- Ways for artists to organize together, socialize and find meaningful connection (e.g. through more roundtables or a similar platform)
- Assistance with promoting submission calls, programs, etc.
- An email list or similar to help with contacting other artists/arts workers

Other specific ideas came forward through the roundtable conversations:

- Establishment of or the provision of public access to an existing physical space with up-to-date equipment that can be used for recording, podcasting, etc. by various individuals and groups who do not have this technology (implementation of this idea would face significant challenges including how such a space would be kept sanitized and safe for use by multiple people)
- Creation of a “brain bank” that acts as a public database for the skills and expertise available in our community; sharing of skills and resources was encouraged but it was noted that it is important that such efforts do not deprofessionalize the arts

Several specific offers of support and connections were also made between participants during the roundtables.

Additionally, participants noted that the arts sector was already in a precarious state prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the situation is now even worse. It was felt important that the assumption that things were good beforehand is avoided, and there is a need to ensure that after this crisis, there are *more* employment opportunities in the arts. It was suggested that the sector may want/need to look for an alternate model for its development and the provision of continuous employment for artists.

The KAC encouraged participants to continue to reach out if there are other ways that we can provide support, noting that we are happy to hold one-to-one Zoom calls with anyone in the arts community, e.g. to brainstorm idea, or connect with resources or other people in the community doing similar work or with the skills they are seeking. Participants were also encouraged to share their online events with the KAC so we can help promote them. The KAC also offered the use of our Zoom webinar tool for those who would like to provide online programming of this sort but are unable to afford this add-on.

Next Steps

While the feedback gathered through the roundtables is not necessarily comprehensive and inclusive of all of the current experiences in our arts community, it provides a general overview of what is happening and the recurrence of central themes points to some key areas for consideration. Out of the roundtables and informed by other conversations in the community - and with an eye on our organizational mission, strengths, capacity and budget - the Kingston Arts Council is exploring the following next steps:

- A more widespread gathering of data from our arts community may be useful to develop a more complete picture of current challenges and opportunities. We are looking at potential methods for this data gathering. Community members in all sectors have been expressing “survey fatigue” so we are considering other options. For example, we are inspired by the Quinte Arts Council, who are asking their constituents to provide their stories by video, in addition to completing a survey.
- There was a clear call from our participants to continue to provide opportunities for virtual gathering. We will continue to offer roundtables through the spring; a schedule of topics is forthcoming. We have also launched discipline-specific Slack channels through the KAC account, which offers a virtual space for ongoing community-led discussions.
- We are looking at bringing together members of our arts community to form a working group or “think tank”, of sorts, to begin to explore what a new model for the arts could be. This work may touch on immediate needs but the focus will be to develop a vision for the arts sector in Kingston and begin to build out realistic plans to move in the desired direction.
- We are also exploring the development of an arts database and/or skill-sharing platform that would provide a directory of Kingston artists and arts groups.
- We will be sharing the feedback from the roundtables, and any other data gathered through future efforts, with the Cultural Services department of the Corporation of the City of Kingston, as well as others in arts and funding leadership, and working with them to explore opportunities for increased financial support and other resources for our arts community.

Further information about our efforts and activities will be communicated through our website, e-newsletter, and social media channels in the coming weeks. Questions about the roundtables or the Kingston Arts Council’s response to the COVID-19 crisis should be directed to Kirsi Hunnako, Executive Director, at kirsi@artskingston.ca.