



## **YGK ARTS ROUNDTABLES**

**MAY 2020**

### **SUMMARY**

**Prepared by Kirsi Hunnako, Executive Director**

In May 2020, the Kingston Arts Council (KAC) facilitated three online roundtables with its arts community in response to the COVID-19 public health crisis. These followed well-received roundtables offered in April with disciplinary groups (arts administrators, music, performing arts, visual arts, and literary arts). The goals of the YGK Arts Roundtables 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 May roundtables were each one hour in length and were scheduled as noted below. The roundtables were facilitated by the KAC's Programming and Communications Coordinator, Laura Chaignon. The roundtables were conducted using Zoom and were not recorded, however notes were taken by KAC staff and are provided below.

- May 13 2-3pm via Zoom - **COVID & the Arts: Planning in Uncertain Times**
- May 20 2-3pm via Zoom - **COVID & the Arts: Financial Strategy**
- May 27 2-3pm via Zoom - **COVID & the Arts: Arts Apart**

#### *Promotion and Attendance*

The roundtables were promoted through the KAC's social media channels and website as well as through targeted emails. Excluding KAC staff members, twenty-two attendees joined the roundtables (seven for Planning in Uncertain Times, ten for Financial Strategy, and five for Arts Apart).

## ***Planning in Uncertain Times - Summary of Discussion***

The group split into breakout rooms to discuss the following questions:

1. What does the process of planning look like right now? How much did the timeline change?
2. How did you navigate the timeline of cancelling or postponing an event or project? What worked and what didn't work? What are the key pieces in making that decision?
3. What do we cancel versus postpone? How do we determine the content that we can move online?
4. How has your programming calendar evolved, deadlines and timelines? How far in advance are you planning things these days? When do you make the final decision of going forward with an event or not?
5. What used to be your deadlines pre-COVID for each important planning pieces, and what are they now? Can we have an estimate of the difference across the board? What are the deadlines for cancelling or postponing?

A summary of the major points of discussion is as follows:

- Many have lost paid opportunities
- Most groups have created online programming but it is acknowledged that there are many community members who don't have the capacity or attention to engage in online programming at this moment
- Those without technological knowledge and capacity are struggling to create online offerings
- Many are feeling frustrated and alone; some expressed grief about COVID-19 and its impact on the arts and our community at large
- While there is a sentiment of "hoping for the best" in regards to the coming months and a lessening of public health restrictions, there was also an commitment expressed to not put anyone (staff, volunteers, audiences, participants) at any risk
- In a similar vein, organizations are putting staff retention and support first, and are being cautious with their spending
- The pandemic has provided time to hone in on personal and organizational values, and on where to put one's time and energy
- There's a need to look for grant and employment opportunities outside the arts in order to get by; it was also felt that granting organizations need to give artists time to rethink their practice
- There is worry about the challenges to come in the fall/winter, when relief funding and other current pots of money are expected to run out
- Fundraising is a particular challenge in this moment
- Groups are used to planning months in advance and are now having to do things on the fly and maintain flexibility; it is challenging to sit with uncertainty
- Leaders are continually creating various iterations of their budgets
- Collaborations with other organizations and artists has been critical to activating programs
- It is expected that audiences will be wary of gathering when regulations permit, particularly those over 40, which constitutes the audience for several groups
- There has been a precipitous drop for the arts that other sectors haven't had to deal with in the same way, particularly around performances and sponsorships
- It was suggested that a shared google drive to share resources might be helpful

- It was noted that we are “writing the books” on how to get through such a challenging time, and it is important that we record how it goes and what we’re doing
- It was felt important to consider what audiences need from us, and to maintain contact with them and offer what we can
- There is a need for “hyperadvocacy” to secure funding for artists, e.g. to cover the cost of venue rentals

### ***Financial Strategy - Summary of Discussion***

The group split into breakout rooms to discuss the following questions:

1. Has anyone successfully monetized online programming? Can we hear about your experience?
2. Does anyone feel confident about how they adjusted their budget for the upcoming fiscal? Could you share about your financial strategy?
3. How do these challenges present themselves for you and your organization and what would be something that would resolve this issue for you?

A summary of the major points of discussion is as follows:

- One organization was able to fundraise to run an online festival with free tickets, working with other community groups
- There is a focus on creating employment opportunities for artists, and ensuring that artists are paid fair artist fees
- Some fee-based online programs have been offered but the fees cover only program expenses, not staff time
- Asking for people to pay for programming right now feels challenging because there are so many free options being offered right now; also, many don’t have the technology to access online programming
- Others are not seeking to monetize programming right now
- Livestreaming platforms can be linked to a donation system to gather revenue from audience members
- Member-based organizations are focused on enhancing value for their members, e.g. by offering virtual studio tours, by converting an in-person annual summit to an online opportunity
- Choir groups are challenged to rehearse and perform through a virtual platform
- Fundraising is tricky because it is hard to plan the next season/programming calendar and therefore can’t define what the funds will be for
- It has been necessary for groups to let go of their pre-COVID budgets and make (and continually revise) projections based on current public health information; it was thought important to stop looking at what “could have been” and look at what is happening now
- It is hard to ask businesses for support in this moment
- The generosity of individual donors has been heartwarming
- It is hard to balance handling immediate costs and playing the long game by setting funds aside
- Groups who had savings accumulated are accessing these funds to get through
- Many are concerned more about next year’s financial situation than this year’s
- Collaboration helps to distribute labour and alleviate pressure on human resources

- It has been necessary to work new technological needs into budgets (both equipment and staff time)
- There has been a positive wave of people wanting to volunteer
- This is a year of self-discovery
- There is a need for funding for continuing, existing programming, not just new programming
- We need to look beyond institutional models to shared platforms and new production models
- To be deemed unessential has been a hard blow

### ***Arts Apart (distanced and online programming) - Summary of Discussion***

The group discussed the following questions:

1. How could you sustain and even expand connecting through distanced or digital programming?
2. What are the things you have to reinvent? What are the things you can build on?
3. Does online/distanced mean scaled down?

A summary of the major points of discussion is as follows:

- There is a need for expertise and resources around streaming content and other technical solutions to bridge communication gaps
- Providing opportunities for interaction is the challenge (“How do I make Slack like a bar?”) so that audiences aren’t just watching and it’s not just about transmission (“a hypodermic needle of cultural exchange”)
- Organizations are working on bridging the gap between different communities, e.g. community artists and student artists
- Capacity is lower but scale is bigger; online programming is attracting audiences from outside of Kingston
- Organizations are asking how to allocate human resources to keep moving forward
- What are we going to have to do to maintain connectivity?
- How can we do Zoom meetings better? How can we transform online tools into something creative and not just exhausting?
- There is a collective concern around ensuring artists get paid
- It’s important to lower expectations around what artists are outputting; art (especially right now) doesn’t have to be perfect and polished; funding is needed to support experimentation and art that is not “ready”
- Theatre owners are closing up shop; their audiences are only interested in consuming art in that particular way
- Programming created by the participants includes online performance series, online exhibitions, public art works, and a porch play
- Many artists on CERB are more financially stable than they ever have been
- Focus not on “how do I adapt what I already do?” and instead on “What can I *only* do now?”  
Have to shift from what we are losing to what we are gaining

See Appendix One for word cloud created out of *Arts Apart* discussion.

*Resources noted during the roundtables*

- [The Metcalf Foundation's COVID-19 fund](#)
- [Linktree](#)
- [FOLDA resources](#)
- [FOLDA DIY Multi-Camera Livestream](#)
- [www.dramaturgiesofparticipation.com/the-blog](http://www.dramaturgiesofparticipation.com/the-blog) (scroll to New World/New Work)
- [Canada Council Digital Originals](#)

Further information about our efforts and activities will be communicated through our website, e-newsletter, and social media channels. 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](mailto:kirsi@artskingston.ca).

Appendix One:

Word Cloud created to reflect *Arts Apart* discussion

commiseration  
engaging live  
like a bar  
how close/far  
gap  
streaming production  
chat  
shared space  
new ways to connect  
connecting different communities  
community spaces  
no rules  
deep interaction  
conversation  
connecting outside of Kingston  
rethink conversation models  
safe spaces  
idea sharing coalition  
interaction  
excitement