

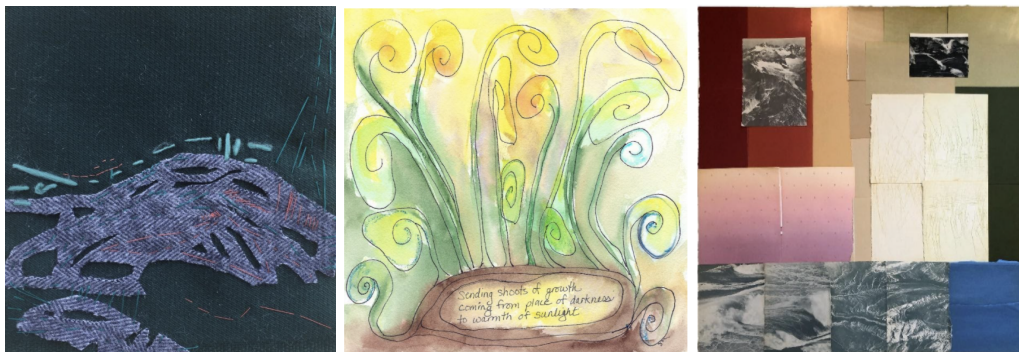
THE STORY OF OUR STORIES

A Regional Community-Engaged Research Project

Thinking Rock Community Arts



"We have the stories. We have the story of our stories."



"Who are we telling that story to? And what are they going to do with it?"

Images from participating community-engaged artists representing their response to the question: What is your highest dream for community-engaged arts in Northern Ontario?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The aim of this document is to tell the “Story of Our Stories” - the story of the impacts made, challenges encountered and dreams held by community-engaged artists across Northern Ontario - to as wide a range of community stakeholders as possible who hold decision making power in this region. This includes: local funders; economic development groups; city planners; municipal staff and elected officials; Chief and Councils; policy experts; business owners; Indigenous community and cultural organizations; social service agencies; health centres and hospitals; educational institutions; MPs and MPPs; federal and provincial ministries; cultural policy makers and influencers; arts and non-arts funders; and other artists and cultural organizations.

The intention behind sharing this story with such a wide breadth of cross-sector actors is to educate and inform each of these groups about the myriad economic, social and cultural impacts that community-engaged artists, organizations and projects are having every day in their communities. More importantly, it is to inspire each of them to examine how they might use their own power and influence to support this important work and dismantle some of the endemic challenges that are standing in the way of its achieving its full potential for making their communities healthier, more creative, more connected, more equitable and more resilient places to live, work and play.

The findings of this report stem from a community-engaged research project undertaken by Thinking Rock Community Arts from March 2019 to October 2020. The study invited 30 artists living and working in the rural, remote and First Nation contexts of Northern Ontario to examine the challenges and opportunities they are facing in delivering community-engaged arts programming in their communities and to consider what supports, research, and/or policy actions might help make their work easier and more sustainable. Research methodologies employed included interviews, focus groups, a survey and participatory arts-based methods.

The report opens by providing background information about the authors, funders and partners of this study and explaining the motivation behind its creation. It then situates the research within larger regional and academic conversations about the proven social, economic and community impacts the arts have on individuals and communities in rural contexts locally and globally. It goes on to provide a definition and overview of community-engaged arts practice, including some of the ambiguities common to this method of working as well as the many art forms, aims and contexts it encompasses.

The report continues with an overview of the cultural, socio-economic, geographic and artistic landscape of Northern Ontario. It outlines some of the challenges artists face in attracting community-engaged arts funding to the region - especially in comparison to urban centres in the

Southern part of the province - by outlining some of the arts-related funding disparities that exist between the regions.

The report goes on to provide an overview of the characteristics of the individual and organizational participants of the study including their geographic locations, cultural and artistic identities, ages, years practicing, organizational budgets, types of art forms practiced, types of community partners they engage in their work, and examples of community-engaged art activities they undertake.

The report then dives into the data by first outlining the multifaceted impacts participants have witnessed their work having on individuals and communities, including: 1) Building diverse, authentic relationships (across culture, age, skills, communities); 2) Anchoring personal growth; 3) Creating opportunities for professional development and employment; 4) Engaging in social and political activism; 5) Facilitating care of place and deeper community engagement; 6) Stimulating dialogue and story-sharing on difficult topics/issues and 7) Paying witness to healing.

The report goes on to highlight the eight major themes that emerged from the data around the question of what motivates community-engaged artists to do this work. These themes include: 1) Accessing other ways of knowing; 2) Stimulating discovery and new learning; 3) Building capacity for change-making; 4) Shifting public perceptions of the arts 5) Empowering with self-knowledge 6) Connecting with others and sharing joy 7) Building community pride and 8) Envisioning new possibilities.

The next section provides a thorough overview of ten major themes related to challenges that community-engaged artists are facing delivering their work in this context including: 1) Lack of sustainability; 2) Lack of public understanding of / advocacy for the arts; 3) Challenge of funding; 4) Systemic barriers of racism and colonialism; 5) Day-to-day operational challenges; 6) Maintaining quality of participant engagement and experience; 7) Engaging in sensitive topics; 8) The balance of self-actualization in community-engaged arts; 9) Assessing the value of community-engaged arts; and 10) Lack of other supports / work opportunities.

Following this, the report outlines a number of creative and innovative solutions that were identified by participants which could help overcome these challenges, centering around the idea of attracting, retaining and supporting community-engaged artists to the region. Ideas for attracting new or returning artists include: strengthening cultural infrastructure; providing tax breaks to working artists; developing more paid work opportunities; making community spaces available for artists to live and work; leveraging unique Northern assets to draw artists to the region; promoting the region to new artists through a short promotional film, website, and word of mouth; and ensuring high speed internet is available across the North.

The report then outlines the ideas participants shared for how to retain and support community-engaged artists already living and working in the region. Participants strongly

agreed that in order to do this there must be a significant effort made to increase and strengthen regional arts administration and human resource infrastructure. This could look like: providing region-specific arts administration training; creating a regional support network with local offices; providing a central human resources support system; ensuring artists are paid according to industry standards; and providing benefits and health care for artists. Additional suggestions included: increasing public funding specific to artists in the North; enhancing networks and connections between artists across the North; enhancing business skills and cross-sector collaboration; educating the public about the value of supporting the arts; and dedicating time, space and money to support the arts.

Following this, the report outlines the single suggestion consistently raised as to how these solutions may be brought to fruition: the creation of a new central organizing body whose role it is to represent and support community-engaged artists across the North. This entity would provide support with: advocacy and public education; networking and mentorship; business and communications; human resources; cross-sector collaboration; and promotions.

The report goes on to offer a hopeful vision for community-engaged arts across Northern Ontario by providing an overview of the conversation held and artworks created around the focus group question of “what is your highest dream for community-engaged arts in Northern Ontario?” This section illuminates the role the participants envisioned community-engaged arts playing in a post-pandemic future, including concepts around healing from individual and community trauma; bringing people together to confront and dismantle racism and other social divisions; helping oppressed people find and share their individual and collective voices; creating a culture where art-making is part of everyday life for everyone; and enhancing the role and value of community-engaged arts practice.

The report concludes by offering suggestions as to how the findings of this report might be disseminated, who needs to hear this story, and how it might best be communicated to the wide range of audiences described above. It closes with the hope that in hearing this story, these diverse actors might come together to shift community-engaged arts work away from its current position of precarity and fragility to one of strength and sustainability that will allow it to play a key role in supporting the healing of rural, remote and First Nation communities across the North, particularly in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

CHAPTER 1: HOW THE STORY BEGAN

Small town, big dream

Thinking Rock Community Arts is a nonprofit community arts organization based in the small town of Thessalon, Ontario (population 1300) in the rural Algoma District of Northeastern Ontario.

The organization was founded in 2012 by Robin Sutherland, who had witnessed the community-engaged art form through such groups as Jumblies Theatre and Clay and Paper Theatre while working in Toronto, and who felt this approach could bring myriad social, cultural and economic impacts to the rural towns and First Nations of the Central Algoma region where she was raised and had since returned to as a professional artist and arts administrator. The organization is now overseen by Artistic Director Miranda Bouchard, Founder and Strategic Director Robin Sutherland, and a nine-person Board of Directors.

Since its founding Thinking Rock has engaged over 4000 people in community-engaged arts programming created with and for settler and Indigenous people living along the North Shore of Lake Huron. Their largest project to date is the *Rivers Speak Community Play*, which was developed in collaboration with 3000 community members over five years and culminated in an outdoor professional theatre performance at the Mississauga First Nation Pow Wow Grounds which featured over 40 community cast members aged 4 to 85 and was performed in English, French and Anishinaabemowin. Their second major project, *Social Fabric*, has been underway since 2018 and has so far engaged more than 2000 people. Since its founding, Thinking Rock has created over 100 local jobs and attracted over \$1m in funding which have been directly invested into the rural communities they serve.

Connecting across distances

The experience of bringing this organization and project to life - which continues to involve surmounting barriers ranging from financial sustainability and job precarity to experiencing vicarious trauma and navigating deeply embedded racism (all of which are now being exacerbated by the pandemic) - inspired Thinking Rock to reach out to other community-engaged artists and arts organizations working in related contexts throughout Northern Ontario to share experiences, resources and learning. In doing so they realized that, while an awareness of like-minded groups and individuals existed amongst community-engaged organizations in this region, the connections between them was intermittent and fragmented in comparison to what artistic colleagues working in urban centres might experience. The vast geography of Northern Ontario was inhibiting frequent connection between practitioners and negating opportunities for collaboration, knowledge sharing or opportunities to participate in and learn from one another's work.

Convening a conversation

This apparent gap in peer learning and support opportunities experienced by Northern practitioners inspired Thinking Rock to invite 15 community-engaged Indigenous and settler artists and arts organizations from across Northern Ontario to Thunder Bay in October 2018 to meet each other and engage in dialogue about their shared work. The main question explored at this initial gathering was: "What challenges and opportunities are community-engaged artists and organizations based in the rural and First Nation contexts of Northern Ontario facing, and what support, research, and policy might help make this work easier/more sustainable?"

This gathering was supported by the Ontario Arts Council and Mass Culture, a national arts research organization that provides support for small groups across Canada to convene artists around pressing local arts research questions. The gathering was attended by community-engaged artists from Thessalon, Thunder Bay, Wiikwemkoong Unceded Territory, North Bay, Sioux Lookout, Kagawong, Biigtigong First Nation, Sault Ste. Marie and Sudbury.

Let's do more of this

The [full report](#) that came out of this gathering can be accessed on the Mass Culture website. A number of shared challenges, barriers and strengths were identified by participants, along with concrete ideas of how they could better work together as a community of practise to support their work and each other. An important outcome of this gathering was that there was a collective desire to maintain these new and revitalized connections, find new ways to identify and communicate their shared impacts, and work together to overcome their common challenges. Hence *The Story of Our Stories* Research Project began.

CHAPTER 2: PREPARING TO TELL THE STORY

The research team

The Story of Our Stories Research Project was led by Lead Researchers Robin Sutherland (Strategic Director), Dr. Lisa Meschino (Research Coordinator) and Miranda Bouchard (Artistic Director) of Thinking Rock Community Arts, with additional research support provided by Sean Meades, Director of NORDIK Institute, based out of Algoma University. It was supported financially by the Canada Council for the Arts and through partnership support from the Ontario Trillium Foundation. Additional administrative and staff support was provided by the NORDIK Institute. Steering Committee members included representatives from the NORDIK Institute, Northern Lights Collaborative, Mass Culture and the Ontario Trillium Foundation as well as a participating artist representative.

Getting the lay of the land

Prior to beginning *The Story of Our Stories Research Project*, the researchers conducted a scan of the relevant literature and related regional studies to ensure they were not duplicating prior work and were situating this research in the wider context of cultural research related to community-engaged arts, rural arts and the arts sector in Northern Ontario.

It was clear from the regional research that while there is a rich and diverse group of artists working across Northern Ontario, for at least a decade there has been an identified need for increased recognition of the arts' role in enhancing community and economic resilience and preserving cultural identity. Identified supports that are required to support and sustain this work include: regionally-based, region-specific funding; network development; and training and capacity building (Ortiz 2017; Ortiz, Meades, Broad 2010; Edwards 2016; Berti 2007).

The broader academic research highlighted that rural arts-based development and entrepreneurship have been promoted around the world to foster community and economic development along with civic engagement and a sense of community (Clammer 2014; Grodach 2011; Anwar-McHenry 2011, 2009; Gibson 2010, 2002; Markusen and Schrock 2006; Gibson and Connell 2004; Florida 2002; Psilos and Rapp 2001; Scott 2000). Arts-driven community and economic development are often cited as a means to stimulate local cultural assets and improve quality of life while attracting jobs, tourists, and new residents (Markusen 2014; Markusen et al. 2013; Pearn 2007; Markusen and Schrock 2006; Mills and Brown 2004; Gibson 2002; Guetzkow 2002). Arts employment and arts initiatives have been shown to be forms of sustainable development because they focus on both near-term and long-term improvements in collaborative capacity, civic engagement, youth arts education, aesthetic connections to nature, and inclusive perspectives that bridge class, ethnic, and power divisions in the community (Grodach 2011; Markusen and Gadwa 2010; Fleming 2009; Reardon 2005; Gibson 2010; Adams and Goldbard 2001; Matarasso 1997). Lastly, proven impacts of community-engaged arts in various social contexts include: improvement in personal health and wellness; social capital; urban renewal or neighborhood regeneration; tolerance; and cross cultural understanding (McQueen-Thomson and Ziguras 2002; Myer 2002; Rogers and Spooks 2003; Mulligan et al. 2007) as well as creativity and economic development (Robinson 1999).

This contextual research was helpful in framing an understanding of the 'state of the arts' in our regional context as well as the multifaceted proven impacts that the arts have had on communities in rural contexts around the world. This research builds upon these findings by focussing specifically on the artistic practice of community-engaged arts, and looking at the impacts created and challenges faced by arts practitioners living and working specifically in the rural, remote and First Nation contexts of Northern Ontario.

What exactly is "community-engaged" arts practice - and who is practicing it?

Community-engaged arts practice is a multi-faceted approach to making art, whose main defining factor is that it involves professional artists working alongside populations who do not self-identify as artists to co-create professional artistic products, making it a uniquely relational form of art making. Unlike most other forms of professional art making, the value and importance of community-engaged arts lies as much in the process of creating the art together as in the final artistic product. It is also highly place-based, in that the underlying stories or 'subjects' of the art are driven, inspired or informed by participating individuals from the community where the artistic process is taking place. In this way, the entire artistic process - from visioning to realization - is informed both by the artist(s) and the community participants. Community-engaged arts projects also often attempt to create specific individual and/or social impacts (whether overtly or covertly) to address the unique needs of the communities they are serving (for example: mental health, social isolation, racial injustice, etc.).

While community-engaged practice generally reflects these basic principles, the forms it can take vary widely, as do the disciplines used and the social contexts in which it is undertaken. The concept of 'community' itself is highly nuanced, as it can include anything from communities of geographies, cultures and ideologies to the community that exists within a specific institution (for example, a school or hospital). Given this multiplicity, community-engaged arts as a practice can be seen as ambiguous and confusing, even by those whose practice falls within its definition:

“Art as a community-based, collectively driven activity is probably as old as art-making itself, and indeed, as the very catalyzing of 'community' as such. In recent years, a variety of terms have been used, each with its own nuanced goals and practices. These include: socially engaged art, community arts, community cultural development, social arts, and participatory arts. In addition, the practices of arts education, creative arts therapies, popular education and creative leadership processes are closely related. While a series of networks of those who practice community-based art have now been established and a body of literature addressing shared concerns is currently being amassed, the boundaries of this community of practice and research, is necessarily porous.”
(Spiegel, 2018)

The artists and arts organizations who participated in this research project reflect this ambiguous and amorphous nature of community-engaged arts practice. Although they were all chosen to participate because their work reflects the basic principles of community-engaged practice as described above, when responding to the interview question “Do you identify as a community-engaged artist?” only 53% responded 'yes', while 29% responded 'no' and 18% responded 'maybe'.

There are a number of contextual factors that may help explain this response. When asked how they identify their work or practice, artists responded with the following answers in addition to or in place of 'community-engaged artist': social worker; arts facilitator; arts administrator; program coordinator; consultant; singer/songwriter; music/arts facilitator; performative theatre artist; interdisciplinary artist; art therapist; arts activist; community entrepreneur; teacher of skills/craft; community builder; radical feminist; arts educator; Indigenous artist; independent artist; artistic producer; curator; movement artist. These responses speak to the overlapping cultural, community, artistic and career-related identities that community-engaged artists tend to hold; the diverse range of drivers and entry points that can bring people to community-engaged arts practice; the complexity and nuance of the practice itself; and the relatively peripheral and precarious nature of community-engaged arts as a source of employment, which leads practitioners to build a range of additional employable skills and parallel careers in order to sustain themselves and their practices.

It is interesting to note that despite the overarching hesitancy to identify solely (if at all) as community-engaged artists that participants expressed, there are very clear unifying aspects of

their practices that act as common threads between them. More interesting still is the striking clarity of vision and similarity of thought that emerged from the data with regard to the drivers, impacts and challenges faced by community-engaged artists identified by this group of artists, as will become clear throughout this report.

CHAPTER 3: HOW THE STORY WAS TOLD TO US

Ethics approval

This project was reviewed by and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Committee at Algoma University on January 16th, 2020.

Recruitment

Participant recruitment employed a Snowball sampling strategy, starting with artists in established regional community arts networks and supplemented by referrals from the project Steering Committee to reach as many relevant sources as possible. These initial participants were asked to identify other artists in their respective communities who fit the inclusion criteria. Only the researchers invited any referred artist-participants to participate in the study. Personal invitations to participate were extended by email or phone by the researchers.

Methods and methodology

Three methods of data collection were used in the study to achieve a breadth and depth of both qualitative and quantitative evidence related to the lived experience of community-engaged artists and arts organizations in Northern Ontario:

- 1) Semi-Structured interviews were conducted by phone or video call with 17 freelance community-engaged artists and representatives from community-engaged arts organizations based in Northern Ontario. Consent was obtained through a written Participant Consent form sent by email. Interviews focused on in-depth qualitative exploration of the personal and social impacts of the participants' community arts work, their unique challenges, and their access to community supports and non-arts partnerships.
- 2) The second method of data collection was through a focus group, which was adapted to an online format due to COVID-19 restrictions. Without the constraints of expense and travel, the online focus group drew a participant attendance of 19 from across Northern Ontario. Similar to the interview method, the focus group provided a means for participants to explore the personal and social impacts of their community arts work, the common and unique challenges, and their access to community supports and non-arts

partnerships. The focus group was structured as an informal conversation among arts practitioners. In addition to the semi-structured questions, it included an arts-based participatory research activity that invited participants to reflect on what their highest dreams are for community-engaged arts in Northern Ontario. The art-making activity helped set the tone for the conversations and provided an opportunity for participants to bring emergent issues and questions forward for consideration by the group.

Participants in both the interviews and focus group were provided a small honorarium in compensation for their time and to honour their knowledge.

- 3) Finally, an online survey was developed (using the SurveyMonkey platform) primarily to gather quantitative data about the economic impact of community-engaged arts work (i.e., Location; Years of Experience; Cultural, Linguistic, Geographic Communities Engaged; Art Forms Used; Types of Activities; Funding Sources; Artist Fee Charged; Community Partnerships). Survey participants consisted not only of community-engaged artists who participated in the focus groups/interviews, but also those community arts practitioners from more remote Northern Ontario communities. Although a total of 26 respondents were logged, only 17 surveys were sufficiently completed for data analysis. The 9 respondents whose entries were eliminated from the final analysis were incomplete due to navigation challenges with the online platform.

CHAPTER 4: THE SETTING

The Northern region of Ontario, where this research took place, encompasses the Districts of Nipissing, Parry Sound, Manitoulin, Timiskaming, Sudbury, Algoma, Cochrane, Thunder Bay, Rainy River and Kenora as well as “102 of the province’s 134 First Nation Reserves, representing 43% of the Indigenous population” (Ortiz 2017) in addition to diverse First Nation, Inuit and Métis peoples living off-reserve. The following treaties pertain to Northern Ontario: the Robinson-Superior Treaty (1850); the Robinson-Huron Treaty (1850); Treaty No. 3 (1873); and Treaty No.9 (James Bay Treaty 1905, adhesions 1929-30). A comparatively large Francophone community is dispersed throughout the region, representing twenty-seven percent of the province’s entire Francophone population. The majority of Northern Ontario’s population resides in its five largest and geographically-distant urban centres - Sudbury, North Bay, Timmins, Sault Ste. Marie and Thunder Bay - with many First Nations, small towns, municipalities and unorganized townships scattered between.

Northern Ontario is “a vast and distinct geological, biological and cultural area comprising 80% of the province of Ontario’s territorial land, but is home to only approximately 700,000 people, representing 8% of the province’s population of 13.6 million” (Ortiz 2017). According to the Government of Ontario, “The region’s economy is primarily resource based, including: mining,

forestry, fishing and oil and gas industries. In 2016, these resource industries accounted for close to 6.2% of the North's total employment compared to 0.8% for the province as a whole...Northern Ontario is also more reliant than other regions on public sector employment, including public administration, education and health care. In 2016, these sectors accounted for 31.75% of the North's total employment compared to 25.47% for the province as a whole." (Government of Ontario 2016).

While in 2012 Ontario's culture GDP was reported by Statistics Canada to be "larger than that of the accommodation and food services industry (\$16.2 billion), the utilities industry (\$14.6 billion), the agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting industries combined (\$7.4 billion) and mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction (\$6.9 billion)" (Ontario Arts Council 2019), there is a lack of publicly accessible data relating to how these cultural indicators may differ for the Northern part of the province.

The arts and culture sector in Northern Ontario

The arts are central to many peoples' lives in Northern Ontario - as practicing professional artists working in all disciplines, and as craftspeople and makers whose traditional art forms have been passed down and preserved through generations and are interwoven with their daily lives. As one research participant noted, for Indigenous communities in particular, artistic practice is often viewed as central to or inseparable from daily and spiritual life:

"Anishinaabe people don't identify themselves as artists with that term. They're like 'I'm not an artist'...but meanwhile they're beading or they're making drums or they're singing. But they don't identify with that...you know, 'I'm not a professional. I'm not within that arts sector. I'm just living. This is what I do.' We do sweat lodges and naming ceremonies and that's pretty wonderful because...when we fuse those two things...as an Indigenous organization we've got some past ways that maybe aren't always activated in other cultural groups. The fact that we can have a sweat lodge ceremony as a part of our projects is quite wonderful."

Each of the larger urban centres have their own substantial cultural institutions, festivals and post-secondary arts training programs. Some of the more recognizable of these include the Laurentian University's McEwen School of Architecture, Northern Lights Festival and the soon to be complete Place Des Arts in Sudbury; Debajehmujig Storytellers on Manitoulin Island; the Algoma Conservatory, Art Gallery of Algoma and 180 Projects in Sault Ste. Marie; the Thunder Bay Art Gallery and Baggage Building Arts Centre in Thunder Bay; and the Capitol Centre, WKP Kennedy Gallery and Whitewater Gallery in North Bay. According to a Hill Strategies Research report on artists by neighbourhood in Canada, the concentration of artists per postal region in Northern Ontario are 1.1% for P0P (Manitoulin Island), 0.8% for P1B (North Bay), and 0.7% for the P7C postal region of Thunder Bay and the P36 postal region of Sudbury. These numbers are above, comparable to or just below the national average of 0.9% (Hill Strategies 2015). The 2016 Census of Canada reported that about 3% of Ontario's individual artists (who

self identify as such) live in the North (Ontario Arts Council, personal communication November 13, 2020). The fact that only 8% of the province's population resides here suggests that there is a substantial presence of practicing artists in Northern Ontario compared to the general population.

Despite this, according to Northern Ontario-based cultural researcher Dr. Jude Ortiz, communities in the Northern region of the province have consistently failed to invest in the arts sector as a viable source of community resilience, seeing it as:

“...a luxury that cannot be afforded during times of economic uncertainty. As a result, the arts remain largely undervalued, under-resourced and underdeveloped in fostering local and/or regional sustainability. The sector lacks infrastructure including policy and planning, governance, human resources, research capacity, education, networks and organizations, sustainable funding models, business development supports, marketing mechanisms, and affordable operating space and live/work accommodations. The limited support for the arts is, in part, tied to development models that are conceptualized and organized into silos, or at best tangentially connected, with the cultural sector providing primarily social benefits that are separate from the economic equation.” (Ortiz 2017)

Throughout the North, the arts are often viewed as something to engage in as a hobby or a voluntary pursuit, rather than a professional livelihood. Even established cultural organizations often lack key foundational infrastructure - such as fundraising skills and strong governance systems - to maintain consistent financial sustainability.

This chronic undervaluing of the arts as a professional pursuit and career path, along with infrastructure challenges and the region's limited population base, makes it challenging for arts organizations to attract individual or corporate donors in comparison to their urban counterparts. There are also very few private foundations that serve this region. Few municipalities provide local arts funding, and many artists live outside of the major urban centers and so do not have access to many (if any) local or regional arts funding sources. This leaves most artists and arts organizations largely reliant on support from the Ontario Arts Council, Ontario Trillium Foundation, and the Canada Council for the Arts.

Unfortunately for artists, this funding can be challenging to attract, especially compared to groups in Southern Ontario. According to data provided by the Ontario Trillium Foundation, between April 1, 2015 and June 30, 2020, only 51 out of 620 (or 8%) of their approved Inspired People grants (their arts-related funding stream) were awarded to groups in Northern Ontario. Of the \$77.2M that OTF has invested in Inspired People grants in that time, 94% went to organizations in Southern Ontario while 6% went to organizations in Northern Ontario. Community-engaged arts organizations are even less likely to obtain funding from the OTF: in the past five years only 2 groups in Northern Ontario received funding for projects related to the grant result “people are engaged in community-based arts creation” compared to 38 in Southern

Ontario. Both of these grants were short-term Seed funding, with no groups being awarded the larger and longer-term Grow funding. The total amount of funding awarded to these two community-engaged art projects in Northern Ontario was \$147,500, compared to \$5,503,000 awarded to the 38 projects in Southern Ontario. (Ontario Trillium Foundation, personal communication July 28, 2020)

Data provided from the Ontario Arts Council is more encouraging, revealing that while few artists are applying for funding from the OAC compared to the rest of the province, those that do submit applications are often successful. In 2019-20, 6% (653) of OAC's total 10,587 applications came from the three northern regions combined. In comparison, 9% (291) of OAC's total 3,117 grants made that year went to artists and arts organizations in the North. Similarly, the three northern regions combined accounted for 7% of total dollars requested and 7% of total dollars granted that year. In 2019-20, a total of 33 grants totaling \$357,930 were made through the Northern Arts Projects program, which is exclusively available to applicants residing in the Northern part of the province. (Ontario Arts Council, personal communication November 13, 2020)

Data related to community-engaged arts funding support in the North from the OAC is even more promising in terms of percentage of grants applied for compared to percentage of grants received. The OAC has three community-engaged arts related grant programs within their Engaging Communities and Schools funding stream: Artists in Communities and Schools Projects; Arts Organizations in Communities and Schools: Operating; and Indigenous Artists in Communities and Schools Projects.

In 2019-20, for these three programs combined, 10% (38) of OAC's total 384 applications to these programs came from the three northern regions combined. In comparison, 13% (21) of OAC's 167 grants made in those programs went to artists and arts organizations in the North. Similarly, the three northern regions combined accounted for 9% of total dollars requested and 11% of total dollars granted through those three programs that year. In addition, 59% (13) of the 22 school boards currently participating in OAC's Artists in Residence (Education) program (AIR-E) are located in the North. AIR-E is a partnership between school boards and the Ontario Arts Council and is also part of the Engaging Communities and Schools funding stream. OAC provides funding to help support the costs of bringing professional community-engaged artists into the schools. (Ontario Arts Council, personal communication November 13, 2020)

CHAPTER 5: THE STORYTELLERS (RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS)

A total of 30 community-engaged artists participated in this research project by completing surveys (n=17), participating in interviews (n=17), taking part in the focus group (n=19) or a combination of these.

Participating community-engaged artists were based in the communities of Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, Desbarats, Echo Bay, Kagawong, Manitowaning, Nippissing First Nation, North Bay, Sault Ste. Marie, Sioux Lookout, St. Joseph Island, Sudbury, Thessalon, Thunder Bay and Wikwemikoong Unceded Territory. Collectively, they represented the Northern Ontario Districts of Nipissing, Manitoulin, Sudbury, Algoma, Thunder Bay and Kenora.

The participants who responded to the survey question about identity (n=17) identified in the following ways: Québécoise; Franco-Ontarian; Canadienne-Française; Non-Indigenous; Jewish; Settler; Mixed heritage (Settler-Ojibwa); Settler of Italian descent; Settler of Celtic, Germanic and Norse heritage; Indigenous; Finnish heritage; Salish (First Nation / BC); Canadian.

Participants who responded to the survey question about age (n=17) ranged in age from 28 to 67 along the following lines:

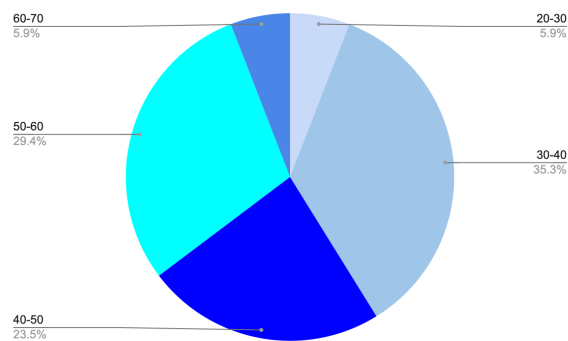


Chart 1: Participant Distribution by Age Range

Of the participants who responded to the question of how many years they had been practicing as an artists (n=12), the responses were as follows:

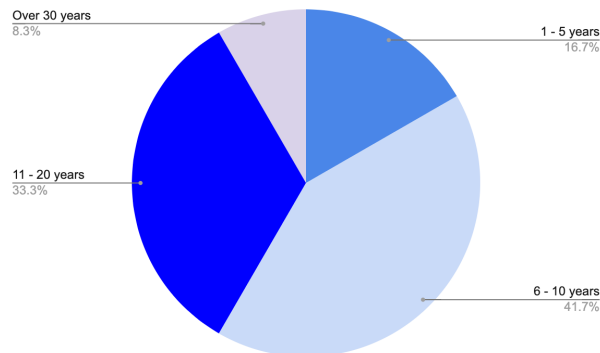


Chart 2: Participant Distribution by Years of Practice (Individuals)

Some participants were freelance artists while others worked for one of the 10 community-engaged arts organizations that participated in the research; some identified as being both freelance and associated with an organization.

Participating community-engaged arts organizations included: 180 Projects (Sault Ste. Marie), Aanmitaagzi (Nipissing First Nation), AlgomaTrad (St. Joseph Island), Debajehmujig Storytellers (Manitowaning), Fringe North International Fringe Festival (Sault Ste. Marie), Mindful Makers (Thunder Bay), Myths and Mirrors (Sudbury), Near North Digital Media Lab (North Bay), OpenArt Studios/The ArtSpeaks Project (Sault Ste. Marie), Project ArmHer (Sudbury) and Thinking Rock Community Arts (Thessalon).

Of the organizations that responded to the survey question about annual budget (n=6), half (50%) had budgets of under \$250,000 while the other half (50%) had budgets over \$250,000. Of the organizations that responded to the survey question about how many years they have been operating (n=5), the responses were as follows:

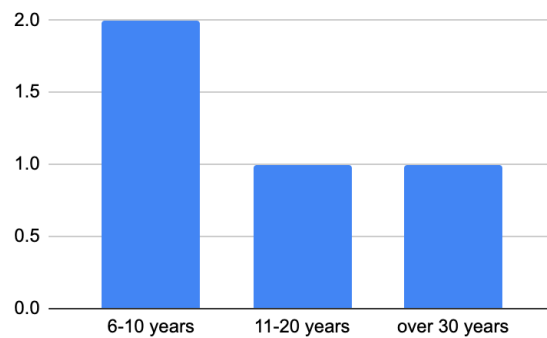


Chart 3: Participant Distribution by Years Operating (Organizations)

The participants that responded to the survey question about which art form(s) they practice (n=12) identified with the following art forms:

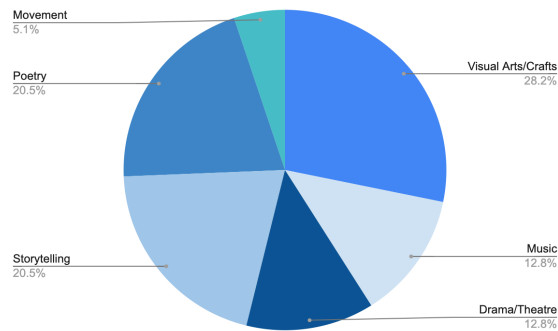


Chart 4: Art Forms Practiced

Additional forms listed included Multimedia (n=1), Land art installation (n=1), and Creative / Entrepreneurial Skills (n=1).

The survey data highlights the fact that community-engaged artists and organizations are not only working all across Northern Ontario, but beyond - into Southern Ontario, Michigan and Québec as well as nationally. They are highly collaborative, working with between 5-15 community partner organizations a year including:

- Other Arts Organizations
- Social Service Organizations (eg. Mental Health and Addiction Agencies, etc.)
- Elementary Schools
- High Schools
- Seniors Centres
- Libraries
- Municipalities
- Museums
- Universities
- First Nations
- Small businesses
- Churches
- Business Improvement Associations
- Indigenous Friendship Centre
- Communication (radio, local TV)
- Arts-based ad-hoc groups and collectives

They are also integrating a wide range of artistic and cultural practices into their work. When asked to identify what kinds of activities their organizations undertake, responses included:

- Co-creating a community-engaged play with community members aged 4-85
- Drop-in multi-disciplinary art-making and storytelling with settler and Indigenous participants of all ages
- Legacy art exhibition featuring community-created works
- Multi-year project focused on textile craft practices local to Algoma's Indigenous and settler communities
- Annual all-ages, music, dance, heritage craft camp
- Fall festival of heritage arts workshops/demos as well as music and dance
- All ages community dances
- Capacity building workshops
- Artist discussions / roundtables
- Creative summit
- Animator training
- Land-based training and presenting
- Harvesting & processing: birch bark, maple syrup, moose, beaver

- Making: tipis, lodges
- Installation and performance creation and presentation in black box theatres, streets, lake ice

CHAPTER 6: THE IMPACTS

“[Community Engaged Arts] is not about going into the arts. It’s about just becoming a successful human being.”

Survey respondents ranked the individual and community impacts they witnessed most often as follows:

- 1 - Increase in local arts-related employment opportunities
- 2 - Relationship building across ages and cultures
- 3 - Improved mental health
- 4 - Reduced social isolation
- 5 - Increased community pride

Following the interview analysis, **seven clear and distinct themes** emerged about the impacts that community-engaged artists working across Northern Ontario have witnessed their work having on individuals and communities. The interview data suggests that community-engaged arts bring deep and wide benefits to communities, participants and artists through:

1) Building diverse, authentic relationships (across culture, age, skills, communities)

Through art-making, individuals share their experiences and interests with each other. Community-engaged arts bring people together across cultures, ideologies, communities, age, skill level and socio-economic status. The empathy and understanding that develops between diverse individuals strengthens authentic community relationships and fosters a sense of inclusiveness.

A prime example of this capacity for nurturing authentic relationships is highlighted in the experience described by one study participant regarding a community play that engaged settler and Indigenous communities in Central Algoma to share the meaning of the rivers in their communities and lives:

“The creation and performance of the play bridged local communities and cultures through shared experiences of the rivers. The Chief of [the First Nation we were partnering with] told me how, as the project grew, the way the town approached the Band about new development projects was more respectful and showed more awareness of sacred ground and ceremonial spaces. It was as though, in working through the [community play] process, non-Indigenous

community members and leaders gained understanding of what those spaces meant to the local Anishinaabe community.”

2) Anchoring personal growth

In their interviews, the community-engaged artists spoke of witnessing participants' personal growth through art-making. The interview data suggest that these emotional impacts encompass a sense of accomplishment; increased self-knowledge; increased sense of calm and attention/reduced anxiety; new cultural learning; new modes of self-expression; and awareness of privilege/authority. Ultimately, this arts-inspired personal growth creates an anchor for participants within community life.

In one of the interviews, an artist described a particularly memorable example of how engagement in a hospital-based community arts program was an anchor for one of her participants that connected her with her past and supported her sense of continuity of self. Throughout the art-making/poetry writing sessions, this participant was non-verbal. She did not engage in the activity or with other participants. But, at the end of the session, she surprised fellow participants as well as the artist-facilitators:

“She hadn't done anything [during the session]. And then right at the end of the session, she recited a poem from her childhood. And everybody was absolutely spellbound. It was, you know, people don't memorize anymore. This was something from, I don't know, grade 5. She knew exactly when she had learned it. And it was so beautiful...It was so beautiful. And the whole class was like, 'Wow'. She hadn't said one word through the session. That was the first thing she said.”

In a different context, another study participant and community-engaged artist noted that, during her contract with a mental health facility in Toronto, she created a type of movement class for outpatients based on her theatre training. She shared the story of how one outpatient who participated in the movement class, *“had gotten herself out of [the mental health facility] and got a job working with a company that created theatre for children with disabilities. And she was like prop hand number five. But it anchored her.”* In this example, participating in a community-engaged arts process provided purpose and direction that was life-altering and affirming.

3) Creating opportunities for professional development and employment

For artists, arts administrators and community members alike, community-engaged arts can provide opportunities to network with other artists and with other members of organizations in the community. Networking opens opportunities for employment, skill sharing, and mentoring. This is important for artists in the community to acquire essential training in the very specific and unique skill set required for community-engaged arts. This skill set requires a balance of best practices of planning and engagement, technical know-how in the arts, and a responsiveness

and adaptability to emergent matters. In the words of one interview participant, facilitating community-engaged arts is:

“...a very different thing. Just a whole bunch of things. You can ... be a painter and a very good painter. But that doesn't necessarily mean you know how to teach. Then you can be a good art teacher, to teach techniques or to teach people how to paint. But that doesn't necessarily mean you know how to do the engagement piece or the process piece...and be able to respond in a really meaningful way. And also to find people that...have nuanced and very thoughtful approaches to questions about the land and questions about Indigenous-settler relations...I think community-engaged practitioners [have to have] a certain level of engagement and thoughtfulness.”

Professional development opportunities are not limited to the artists alone. Indeed, a community-engaged arts project, such as a community play, can build the social and economic capacity of smaller rural communities by creating small local employment contracts (e.g., catering, photography, rental spaces). Investing project funding into the community can support people who face barriers to employment and address some of the financial precarity in Northern Ontario's rural and First Nation communities.

4) Engaging in social and political activism

Community-engaged arts can raise awareness of important issues, confront injustice, and amplify the voices of systemically oppressed groups as well as individuals. The interview data highlights the breadth of issues that community-engaged artists in Northern Ontario have addressed, ranging from environmental sustainability and land and water stewardship, to body image and mental health, to residential schools, the Sixties' Scoop and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

One of the artists interviewed shared her experience of the social and political impacts of community-engaged arts, working with political theatre as part of the “Bleeding Hearts Coalition”. The Coalition was a response to Mike Harris' “poor bashing” platform, which portrayed people on welfare as being frauds. Harris went so far as to create a snitch line for people to call out their neighbours who were suspected of abusing welfare. As the artist explained:

“...we were doing, I mean, really in-your-face theater...he said the only people who would be against this are bleeding hearts. So we started the Bleeding Hearts Coalition. And we know it was like absolute resistance and absolute reaction. And they shut it down...But you have to confront this stuff.”

5) *Facilitating care of place and deeper community engagement*

Beyond individual gains of confidence, self-expression and empowerment, the interview data suggests that participants in community-engaged arts gain a sense of responsibility for their community. The artists told stories of community members' involvement in caring for the places where they live.

For example, a youth-led mural project in an underserved neighbourhood of Sault Ste. Marie was transformative of the misconceptions and stigma associated with the place:

"It's really that impact ... the youth take the responsibility and the adult facilitators just become guides ... For the mural project ... people get to just talk. They like seeing color in the neighborhood...It was...oh this is a really crappy place to live. You know, it's stay away [and] other ideas or stigmas that can get attached to a particular neighborhood. It breaks that down and it also breaks it down for the youth that are painting. They're not ruining things. They're not causing damage. They're bringing beauty into a place. And people start to talk. So people who would normally not talk ... it brings people together and breaks down misconceptions about people. And that's what's really great."

In the case of one organization's rural events space, local residents engage with musicians and facilitators not only as participants in the multigenerational community music and arts programs, but also as volunteers who maintain and care for the space:

"It's like an intergenerational, multigenerational location. So people are experiencing the programs and events with their kids or with their parents or with their grandparents ... And that, because [of] their experience in that place...not only do they have a connection, but they have ... an investment in something that is actually in place."

"We've had a lot of community members come and help make the place tidy ... it's making an investment. They've invested their time and I see that as community-engaged arts because they are creating. They are absolutely just creating a place... It's everybody's. You come. You do whatever you see needs to be done. And it's just been phenomenal. We want the place to be community-built. It's for everyone."

6) *Stimulating dialogue and story-sharing on difficult topics/issues*

Community-engaged arts provide opportunities for generating and bridging conversations between strangers, often stimulating dialogue around difficult social issues. One artist interviewed shared the experience of producing a dance theatre piece (with installation)

featuring four female performers that explored the history of personal, family, and community trauma and the passing of trauma from generation to generation.

“It intertwined the community stories, the children, the Elders within these installations. And then there were questions that people got ... to reflect on and contribute before and after the show....And so some of the Elders, when they were coming out after the show, they were like ... now those are our stories. And that's how you tell the truth. And, you know, these women were really openly talking about, you know, like some of the experiences that they had as you know, Temagami Anishinaabe One of the [performers] had said ... it's about time that someone tells our stories ... how often do we get to see each other in such a full, rounded way?”

7) *Paying witness to healing*

The research findings suggest that community-engaged arts have the potential for healing through creating connections to cultural and personal histories and legacies. Creating an environment where people can pay witness to others' experiences is vitally important in creating a sense of connection and validating their experiences/stories. The experience of “paying witness to” is especially meaningful for people who have experienced the isolation of trauma. Healing happens through that connection. In the words of one artist who provided community art-making opportunities for women suffering trauma:

“When I started the [project] back in 2017, speaking with [a colleague] at the [sexual health organization]... the thing that she said that I always kind of keep in mind is the witnessing factor. That people ... with trauma, because they do spend so much time alone in their session with their therapist, let's say, if they choose to go that route, or at home locked up in their basements, or in their living rooms with the shades drawn. To actually be able to share their experience and have the public, to have others, strangers, witness it and not reject it, but witness it, like they can have their own reaction, wherever that is. But the witnessing is a very important part for the individual so that they don't feel like they've gone through this by themselves. They don't feel that they're crazy, that they're alone and that people get a sense of understanding what happened to them.”

CHAPTER 7: THE MOTIVATION

“[Community engaged arts] allows for that kind of slow, slow community work, which I think is really important”.

There is something special and unique about the process of facilitating and experiencing creative engagement with community. In this study's interview data, **eight key themes** emerged that highlight what it is about the unique process of community-engaged arts that motivates artists to work in this way:

1) *Accessing other ways of knowing*

According to this study's findings, community-engaged artistic processes enable artists and participants to **access other ways of knowing**. The community-engaged arts process provides multi-sensory, experiential, and accessible methods for approaching community and individual issues outside of the dominant models of speaking and thinking. By responding in sensorial ways to the world around them, artists and participants allow new knowledge to emerge pertaining to the issues being explored. Through working with their hands, accessing their emotions and memories, and reflecting and journaling, the community-engaged arts process helps participants to see and perceive issues differently. The artist-facilitators provide materials and space so that people feel comfortable to create. Often, facilitators normalize the art-making process by integrating familiar and comforting everyday rituals: making tea, sharing food, having conversation, and even dancing. As one artist stated:

“I think about community-engaged arts as a practice or a discipline that is collaborative, that is focused more on process than product, and that it is a way to make art with others, especially others who might not have access to the arts in other parts of their lives. And everybody's voices and contributions matter and...help shape that.”

In the words of an artist who creates community-engaged programs for local individuals living with dementia:

“I think a benefit also is that it engages all the senses... So I try to bring sensory elements like smell, touch, sound to try to bring in all those elements because I think...our fast paced world and people struggling just to survive can make those sensory elements less and less available to us... and pushed down, you know. So I think that creates a sense of calm in people. And I observed that when ... people are engaged with their senses and engaged in a creative process, which is a whole other thing, the creative process...reduces anxiety and gives people a sense of calm and a feeling like they're not being judged. And also concentration.”

2) *Stimulating discovery and new learning*

From the participants' perspectives, the community-engaged arts process stimulates the **excitement of discovery and new learning**. Working with a community-engaged arts process empowers participants to focus on their capabilities. Participants often experience excitement in trying new things. For many, they gain insight into and learn how to honour the ways in which

their creative process reflects their life experience. Having a creative experience is a process of personal discovery. Furthermore, participants feel a sense of fulfillment through their involvement in a community experience:

“I’ve come to a really deep understanding about the power of working with our hands. I now believe in hands releasing ancestral memory. ...I’ve observed that when you give people other ways of expressing themselves and communicating, ...all this all this knowledge is opened up. All this wisdom, knowledge that you have to question: where does that come from? It’s always in them.”

3) Building capacity for change-making

This sense of fulfillment in community experience emerges from the **change-making capacity of the creative process**. A community-engaged arts project can create space for important and meaningful dialogue to happen, for exploring in a safer way topics that otherwise may seem too challenging to broach. Community-engaged arts can create cross-cultural exchange and lift up the stories and voices of community members that have been systemically oppressed and underrepresented. Hearing other people’s stories through the arts enables individuals to see each other in a fuller, more rounded way and share moments of truth together. The potential for new understanding that this social connection provides is fertile ground for creating meaningful social change in communities.

Regarding the community story-telling of the community-engaged play one research participant observed:

“And there was a big installation in the lobby....like drums, canoes, tan hides, moose hair tufting was all throughout the lobby area. [A local Indigenous artist] had brought some of his artwork in. One of the artists who we work with...worked on the installation with [a visiting artist]. And so there was this whole team of artists, this whole community that uplifted this story.”

4) Shifting public perceptions of the arts

In keeping with its change-making capacities, the community-engaged art making process can **shift public perceptions of the arts**. The slow community-based work of community-engaged arts imbues the creative process with a deeper meaning. By having increased access to arts in a place where they live and work, community members in the rural and First Nation contexts can gain appreciation for the arts as a way of bringing people together to envision and make meaningful changes in their communities. In this way, community-engaged art helps break down the stigmatizing perception of the arts as being elitist: that is, something that can only be understood, practiced and engaged with by a select few:

“This is life. This is just normal. Making, creating, eating, sharing, talking, dancing. It’s normal. And to normalize it... it takes it out of that context of ‘I can’t

draw. I can't do this.' And as a teacher, I hear that hundreds and hundreds of times through every class I've ever taught. And so I tell kids: well, let's put those words aside. Good and bad. Let's look at things in a different way and not 'don't use that language; I never want to hear you say that again'. It's more 'let's, let's just experiment. And let's change the wording to: let's see what happens.' And let's have fun ... This is very much integral to life. If we don't create and respond and feel... where are we at? So I feel that that is extremely important."

5) *Empowering with self-knowledge*

According to the lived experiences of the artists interviewed for this study, community-engaged arts can **provide the resources, time, and safe space for individuals to connect meaningfully with personal issues**. Creative exploration shines a light on participants' potential to see themselves differently, and to grow:

"[I think about] a woman who's participated with [our project] probably going on two years off and on. And the connections that she makes and the realization that she has ... not that art-making replaces her addiction to drugs and alcohol, but that it helps her make sense of the trauma in her life that caused her to feel so negatively about herself - that she chose to use drugs and alcohol to kind of numb herself to her reality."

6) *Connecting with others and sharing joy*

As an opportunity for community engagement, a community-engaged arts project or program brings people together across perceived barriers such as age, geographic location, ability, gender, race, socio-economic status and culture. **To create and connect with others in a shared space and around a shared interest or purpose builds trust, respect, and joy**. As one community-engaged artist observed:

"When I was coordinating different programs with this community arts organization...a couple of the programs were in neighbourhoods working with youth, they were underserved neighbourhoods. And what we would find over time is that the young people really prefer working with the same artists over a period of time. They develop a relationship. You feel a little bit of a sense of safety or security, and then they're also more willing to take creative risks to try something new. Because this safe space has been created where they know this artist they're working with and they trust that they're gonna keep showing up."

7) *Building community pride*

As seen in the previous section, community-engaged arts create opportunities for people to **connect meaningfully to their community and promote a sense of pride** and ownership.

Community need not be limited to geographic location. In Northern Ontario, community-engaged arts can be effective in reducing isolation by bridging distant geographic communities through dialogue around shared issues of civic engagement.

“So community engagement within the arts seems to be like a pretty common practice, that's kind of naturally ingrained within the arts. In the fact that most of the time that you have people producing arts, they're also putting them into a public space to create a public dialogue. ... So these kinds of civic engagement, these practices seem like there's something that is kind of naturally ingrained within the arts as a form of communication.”

8) *Envisioning new possibilities*

A creative process for engaging with topics that may seem too challenging or difficult can provide pathways for hearts and minds to **dream of future possibilities and envision new realities**. As one community-engaged artist reflected:

“We use different ways to understand things. And that could be from [the] intellectual to the embodied. So we're using different ways of approaching issues...art does [make] change that touches people in ways that other methods may not. And it brings people together in different ways. So I think we get access to...different aspects ourselves. Both sides of our brains, our bodies, our heart, our memories. And it's also vision...there's a sort of visioning piece of it that I think art can do that isn't necessarily done in other forms.”

CHAPTER 8: THE CHALLENGES

Survey respondents ranked the challenges they encountered most often in leading community-engaged art projects as follows:

- 1 - Financial precarity [e.g., lack of benefits; scarcity of funding or employment]
- 2 - Stigma or devaluing of arts work as professional work
- 3 - Mental health of participants and/or arts workers
- 4 - Experiencing vicarious trauma
- 5 - Social isolation
- 6 - Racism

In their interviews, the artists were very forthcoming and clear about the specific challenges they encounter through their work in Northern Ontario. The interview data revealed that artists are facing **10 major challenges**:

1) *Lack of sustainability*

The lack of sustainability of community-engaged arts as a career choice was the most frequently cited challenge by interview participants. The community-engaged art career pathway tends to be defined by piecemeal, part-time independent contracts, often with not-for-profit organizations that are themselves grant dependent and struggling for sustainability.

This is corroborated by the survey findings, which revealed that, of individual artists who responded to the survey question asking whether community-engaged arts is their only source of employment (n=10), 100% answered no, with additional sources of income including: selling artwork from their individual practice; holding various other jobs and contracts within the arts sector; sessional instructor at a university; teaching art workshops; other short-term contracts and consulting work; and holding another full-time job. The amount they reported making on average per year from their community-engaged arts work ranged from \$1,500 to \$20,000 with the average being \$7,600. One participant responded: *“I cobble together an income with part-time jobs”*. The survey data reveals that the average full-time salary within the community-engaged arts organizations who responded to the survey (n=5) ranged from \$0 (Artistic Directors are both volunteers) to \$46,670, with the average annual salary being \$35,000.

What this means for some artists is that they are rarely connected to one organization or project for very long, which presents a barrier to the long, slow process of relationship-building that is integral to community engagement and the community-based creative process. Furthermore, to sustain themselves, many artists find that either they have to rely on the support of a spouse/partner who has steady work, or that they have to be artists “on the side” while diverting their energy into other forms of full-time employment.

Because of this reality, in Northern Ontario, there are few opportunities for community-engaged artists to be anchored in professional organizations. Austerity restrictions frequently starve out small grassroots/nonprofit arts organizations. For these arts organizations, sustainability means a reliance on grants and a small team of local volunteers. Burnout is a real possibility for the lead artists and the volunteers. As one interview participant said of the maintenance and succession of their arts organization: *“If [my colleague] and I weren’t pushing the stone up the hill, would it continue? I don’t know.”* The limited opportunities for work (whether sustained or intermittent) and the relatively small number of organizations make it difficult to build a career in community-engaged arts in the North.

2) *Lack of public understanding of / advocacy for the arts*

Connected to the challenge of sustainability is the general lack of public understanding about the value of the arts in general and community-engaged arts in particular. With regard to community-engaged arts, the more that people become engaged in and care about the work, the greater the possibility for sustainability. Challenges with the creative engagement of communities seem to be associated with a broader lack of understanding of the arts in general.

According to the lived experience of the artists in this study, the main barriers to recognizing the value of the arts stem, in part, from geographic distances that separate communities in the North. This makes the arts accessible to only a limited number of people or communities. As such, many community members have experience or knowledge of the arts from a passive observer's perspective. In addition, societies set up to focus on competition, technical expertise, speed of production, and product quantity may be unable to value or understand the slow, relationship-centred process of community-engaged arts. Businesses or corporations in the North that support the arts are relatively few and far between. Furthermore, the absence of any direct experience or practical understanding can give rise to unrealistic assumptions and expectations: that the arts is solely a product of those rare individuals gifted with talent; that the arts are a frill as opposed to a necessity for our human development; that arts facilitation does not require the time and cost of other "real work" and should be offered for free.

What these findings highlight is the integral need for communities to increase their respect, recognition, and valuing of the arts in general by experiencing directly the creative work happening by and for their community members. People who have experienced the value of community-engaged arts can share that experience and empower others with this understanding and in turn make it more accessible to others. As one study participant said: *"We tend to want to take care of the things that we care about."*

3) Challenge of funding

The study data suggests that the funding landscape for community-engaged artists and arts organizations in Northern Ontario is challenging in several ways. First, there is a scarcity of funding sources and opportunities compared to the number of foundations and corporate sponsors in Southern Ontario. The scarcity of funding in the North means having to overcome a highly competitive environment, where the lengthy application process and delayed notification period can curtail a project's development. For those artists and organizations that succeed in securing funds, there is generally not enough money to support the project costs while also making a living. Ultimately, the lack of sufficient funds to pay artists and arts administrators properly is a worrisome burden that takes energy away from the meaningful work of community-engaged arts.

4) Systemic barriers of racism and colonialism

Building trust in relationships between First Nation and settler communities is often an integral part of community-engaged arts work, especially in the Northern Ontario context, where structural and individual racism toward Indigenous peoples runs deep. The findings of this study suggest that Indigenous community-engaged artists and arts organizations in Northern Ontario are facing additional systemic barriers to accessing resources, a reality that is rooted in the ongoing colonial legacy of Canadian society, government resistance to authentic reconciliation and reparation, intergenerational trauma, and the top-down frameworks of funding agencies.

As one survey respondent noted in response to questions about challenges they are facing in this work:

“There is data referencing the lack of Indigenous art representation nationally, provincially and locally. This has been a recognized constant for a number of years. We encourage a new increased short and long term plan.”

First Nations rights need to be a strategic priority in arts resource redistribution that confronts this ongoing colonial legacy and honours nation-to-nation reconciliation and Indigenous laws. As one Indigenous study participant observed:

“We're identified as under-represented, under-resourced. Canada just has to move over. The arts sector has to be (...) redistributed. So if we only have one hundred dollars, that has to be redistributed. And it's quite simple. But you have to have willing players. And I think that's where we sit...there's empathy for our circumstance, but then the political will is not always there. And I think it's the same for oppression across many sectors, whether it's women or gender ...”

5) Day-to-day operational challenges

As suggested earlier in the findings, many community-engaged artists and arts organizations struggle to balance the numerous operational responsibilities of a community-engaged arts project with the development and facilitation of creative engagement. Study participants cited the following among the operational challenges they face on a daily basis:

- Coordinating schedules of all participants and facilitators
- Securing participant commitment over the duration of the project
- Providing for participants' comforts and needs (i.e., food, travel, childcare)
- Volunteering additional time for administrative responsibilities (e.g., grant writing, connecting with community partners, budget reconciliation, marketing)
- Time to think and reflect on the relevance, design, and possibilities of a project.

Given the limited time and budget for a community-engaged arts project, time spent attending to such basic operational responsibilities can mean sacrificing the effective development of community partnerships and the depth of creative engagement.

6) Maintaining quality of participant engagement and experience

Study participants remarked on the skill, thoughtfulness and nuanced relationship building required of a community-engaged arts practitioner in order to maintain a high quality engagement experience. According to the data, a high standard for participant experience involves:

- Keeping up momentum of participant engagement

- Balancing the integrity of the original idea for a project with emerging ideas/considerations
- Supporting participants' creative growth in a project with skill-building opportunities
- Letting go of the outcome (i.e., the final creative result) to let other voices inform the project
- Facilitating collaborative problem-solving (with others)
- Being adaptable, i.e., having a plan, but being willing to change it according to participants' needs

7) *Engaging in sensitive topics*

For community-engaged arts practitioners, there is a challenge in making space for dialogue about difficult or sensitive subject matter, such as body image, mental health, systemic oppression and change. Community-engaged artists are challenged to find a balance between addressing and representing difficult subjects while ensuring participants, facilitators and audience members aren't triggered or re-traumatized. It is also a challenge to have the skills and capacity to navigate, facilitate and support these conversations. When other social supports in the community are inaccessible or unavailable, people are drawn to the arts for similar support. When participants come with these expectations, the joy and learning that artmaking brings can shift.

8) *The balance of self-actualization in community-engaged arts*

In addition to balancing the creative and operational practicalities of a community-engaged arts practice, this study's findings show that practitioners are sometimes required to balance issues of self-actualization. In other words, they need to balance questions of personal and professional growth, such as:

- Working with an organization vs. working independently: on the one hand, a practitioner may gain more credibility with communities by working within an established organization; on the other hand, if a problem surfaces with the direction an organization has taken, the individual practitioner will be associated with it and will most often not have human resource or advocacy supports available to address any concerns that may arise
- Facilitating in a digital environment without non-verbal or gestural cueing. As one study participant observed, "*How can we build connection and community if we're not getting a full-body or in-person experience of each other?*" (this is especially true in the current covid context of online programming).
- Navigating differing relationships with scarcity and privilege within the context of an inequitable, colonial system.
- Letting go of the need to be the "expert" in order to hold space for shared time together with others.

9) *Assessing the value of community-engaged arts*

As mentioned earlier, many practitioners are confronted with a lack of public understanding of community-engaged arts as being real work as opposed to a 'frill'. Determining what counts as success for creative, experiential projects and what metrics are most meaningful for gauging that success are not always clear or compatible. On the one hand, the experiential process of community-engaged arts can be difficult to trace:

"... it's process based and having conversations. Those kinds of things are really hard to track depending on what kind of thing that you're looking for... I bump into this in schools all the time, that schools don't understand that kind of approach ... How can you go into a classroom and not know what you're going to do, and ... what it is you're learning when you're just wandering around in the schoolyard with whatever magnifying glasses, or how drawing a leaf is teaching about ecology or whatever. So it's ... in those contexts having to define things based on this external curriculum expectation. So they don't always necessarily fit. And unless you have somebody documenting like we did on that project and then...people see it. A lot of times you don't document the work. And it's very hard to make it visible or to communicate it."

On the other hand, having measurable deliverables is very important in terms of carrying the momentum of the work forward. As one study participant who is a theatre artist pointed out:

"What deliverables are you trying to meet and then how will you measure those? ... Those are things like how many tickets did you sell? How many bums are in your seats? Did you make your budget back? Were you able to contribute in any way outside of this work? Who were you engaging? Did new people come out or is it the same old actors you see all the time?"

Overwhelmingly, the study data shows that the burden to educate the community on the value of community-engaged arts rests with the artist/arts organization, whichever approach or set of metrics they choose to assess the impact of their work.

10) *Lack of other supports / work opportunities*

Finally, in addition to funding scarcity, study participants also highlighted a lack of other resources essential for supporting the growth of community-engaged arts in the North. Specifically, the data suggest there is a lack of human resources necessary for things like documenting participant experiences through photos and stories. Through proper documentation, the work of community-engaged arts can be made more visible (and potentially more valuable) to the general public. Other resources identified as being necessary include accessible spaces for creating/performing new work, and additional project team members, such as arts administrators, promoters, producers, or stage managers. It was also noted that while there are often qualified people interested in filling these roles, opportunities to learn these

skills first-hand or obtain specific training in these areas are limited in our northern communities. This in turn leads to a higher amount of burnout among the small number of those who do have the relevant training and experience. This reality in turn relates to the lack of Arts Service Organizations in the region, who could play a role in helping to build this cultural infrastructure.

CHAPTER 9: THE SOLUTIONS

While the participating artists were able to easily identify the myriad impacts they have seen their work have in the communities they work with, as well as surface a number of common challenges they faced in practicing their work, they were able to just as quickly and easily identify common and innovative solutions to address and overcome these challenges. In particular, the artists spoke with one voice about the need to **attract, retain and support community-engaged artists** in the region.

Two main solutions were presented for attracting artists: further developing **cultural infrastructure** and **promoting arts and culture**.

There was a strong sense that strengthening our **cultural infrastructure** is a first step in attracting artists to the region. As one participant put it, *“To attract people who are interested in culture, you need to have culture.”* An example was given of the substantial efforts made by local municipalities and health networks to attract doctors to the region, especially those originally from the north. There could be parallel and unified efforts made to attract cultural workers to the region, especially those who may be from the North originally but had moved elsewhere for education or employment.

Specific ideas put forth by participants for **attracting community-engaged artists** to the region included:

- Providing **tax breaks** for freelance artists and ad-hoc collectives to help address the financial precarity of the work
- Creating more artist residencies, cultural projects and other **paid work opportunities** and specific funding to support them (while being sure to employ chronically underpaid northern artists first)
- Making vacant storefronts and other community spaces available as **creative spaces for artists to live and work** by partnering with local businesses, municipalities and groups that own vacant physical infrastructure (examples of existing creative spaces include Debajehmujig Creation Centre and Ojibwe Cultural Foundation on Manitoulin Island)

- Leveraging current tourism and cultural assets to **draw artists to the North** by focusing on the beauty and inspiration of the northern landscape, the low cost of living and the tight camaraderie of rural communities
- Producing a **short promotional film** featuring arts organizations and projects to highlight the diversity, range and quality of the Northern arts sector
- Developing a **website** featuring photos and content from different community-engaged arts organizations and projects
- Increasing **word of mouth** communications about what the North has to offer new and returning artists
- Ensuring availability and access to **reliable high-speed internet**, especially in rural areas

Some participants noted that **retaining artists** to the region is the biggest challenge, as cultural workers here are faced with endemic issues including job precarity, lack of pay equity, limited access to health benefits, and few opportunities for professional development. As a result, succession and retention are ongoing issues that work to destabilize an already fragile cultural ecosystem.

“I feel really passionate about this work. And I feel like I want to commit myself in service of this work and in service of these communities in this context for as long as I possibly can. [But] as I get older, there are questions that arise for me about the sustainability of that, both in terms of...the sustainability of the practice and...my ability to stay in it. And not because I'm not passionate about it, but for a bunch of other complicated life factors. (...) It's probably some of the most demanding work that I've ever done. (...) I do feel a really heavy weight of responsibility to communities, to the funders, to the Board, to the people that I'm working with (...) if you're not careful, those burdens can actually displace responsibilities that you have to your personal life, too.”

A majority of participants noted that the most important change needed in order to mitigate this issue and retain artists in the north is to **increase and strengthen regional arts administration and human resource infrastructure**.

This could look like:

- Creating opportunities for **region-specific arts administration training**, workshops and other professional development supports that build on and learn from established models (ie., Jumblies Theatre and Arts training program, Art Gallery of Ontario training), which would in turn support the emergence of more regionally-based community-engaged arts organizations and artists
- Creating a **regional support network** serving community-engaged artists with representatives embedded in different communities across the region (examples of this model include Cultural Industries Ontario North [CION], FedNor, OAC). This is especially

important in the wake of recent funding cuts to the OAC and their former Northeastern representative role, which have negatively impacted support to Northern artists.

- Creating a central **human resources support system** for artists who they can contact when employers take advantage, mistreat, refuse payment, etc.
- Advocating for community-engaged artists and arts administrators to be **paid according to industry standards** (and clarifying what those might be in community-engaged arts practice)
- Providing **benefits and health care** supports for artists

Additional ideas for what is required to **retain and support** artists already living in the region include:

- An increased commitment of sustained and substantial public **funding** to support the arts in Northern Ontario
- Fostering trusting **relationships** among artists across communities and regions through consistent and sustained opportunities to connect (e.g. periodic regional gatherings and other ways of reducing geographic separation)
- Creating more opportunities for enhancing **business skills** including skill sharing, training, business supports, and helping artists to promote themselves, get contracts and build professional networks
- Increasing **cross-sector collaboration** by encouraging partnerships between businesses/social enterprises, arts organizations and institutions that support culture (e.g. Indigenous cultural groups) and preserving arts programs in schools
- **Advocating and educating the public** about the intrinsic and monetary value of the arts; why it is worth it to buy from and otherwise support local artists/artisans, and pay for cultural events
- Dedicating **space, time, and funds** to support the local arts community

Taking such steps to **attract, retain and support community-engaged artists** within the region would allow for the flourishing of cultural development and diversity of thought, which would in turn make our Northern communities more vibrant, equitable and livable.

CHAPTER 10: COMING TOGETHER

“When I was part of [arts organization], what I would hear often from artists is that they are working alone. They’re working with participants, but they’re not working with other artists.”

In order to overcome the challenges raised and address the needs identified, one specific solution emerged strongly from all of the conversations: the need for a **central organizing body** to be established with the specific mandate to support and connect community-engaged artists across the region. The support this entity could provide would be multi-pronged and include:

Advocacy and public education support:

- Acting as a **central representative body** for community-engaged arts organizations and practitioners in the North
- Building **community awareness** about community-engaged arts as a valuable public service leading to more respect and legitimacy for the practice
- **Educating non-arts organizations** about community-engaged arts practice as an immersive art experience vs. a one-off arts workshop; that this work requires substantial planning, time, support of participants and a specific professional skill set
- **Educating partners** about the true costs associated with running community-engaged art projects and programs to ensure projects and artists are properly supported
- **Advocating for more local, regional, provincial and national funding** supports for community-engaged arts practice, as well as funding structures that are specific to community-engaged arts (ie., long-term grants that invest in the mission rather than specific projects or phases, as the community-engaged process is slower than other arts projects by design) and recognize the need for mental health practitioners who are also artists (ie., art therapists) to access funding, as there are overlaps between these practices

Networking and mentorship support:

- Supporting **ongoing communication** between community-engaged arts practitioners across the region (for example, monthly digital gatherings to update and share)
- Organizing periodic **local and regional gatherings** for community-engaged practitioners to connect with each other that would build relationships; build community; allow for sharing of current work; and create opportunities for creative cross-pollination
- Creating more opportunities for **peer support, mentorship and connections** between practitioners
- Supporting more **cohesion and collaboration** - and less isolation and competition - within the arts sector by fostering connections between community-engaged practitioners and other arts organizations (e.g. galleries, guilds, media labs) to support each other and partner on initiatives
- Providing support in the form of **regional travel funding** for artists to visit and learn from one another

Business and communications support:

- Helping artists **navigate and discover funding agencies** and opportunities
- Providing **support with grant writing**
- Developing **partnerships with local decision makers and businesses** to allow for use of vacant spaces (e.g. storefronts) for artists to activate, live and work from. These spaces could also act as communal spaces where artists can gather to network, socialize and encourage natural relationships within a community
- Helping artists access better **digital and technological infrastructure** (high speed internet, access to high quality technologies and training for documenting and disseminating work, etc.)
- Creating and hosting a **website** that includes: a description of community-engaged arts practice; suggested fee structures; tips for developing projects; a calendar of events; an online directory and biographies of community-engaged artists and arts organizations. The website could be used by community partners as a resource to hire local artists for projects and find other collaborative partners
- Sending a quarterly **newsletter** featuring news and updates from across the region

Human resource support:

- Supporting the development of more **stable work, pension plans and medical benefits** for community-engaged artists on the basis that arts and culture is fundamental to community health and vitality and needs to be viewed, valued and supported as such
- Instituting a model of care for cultural workers including **mental and physical health supports**
- Supporting artists in **demanding professional pay rates** aligned with industry standards (for example, instituting a minimum base fee with pay scale according to experience [emerging, mid-career, mature artists])

Supporting cross-sector connections:

- Deepening **cross-cultural and cross-sectoral knowledge-sharing** and partnerships
- Working to embed community-engaged arts practice into true **holistic community-building**: environmental sustainability (permaculture, edible landscapes); centering artists in communities, neighbourhoods, and non-arts sectors; engaging artists in the process of re-creating and re-envisioning the new post-pandemic “normal” for society
- Supporting **youth involvement** in the arts to cultivate and empower the arts leaders of tomorrow
- Helping to bring more **community-engaged artmaking into workplaces**, hospitals, schools, other institutions; paying artists to provide creative respite for employees; providing space and materials in workplaces to support this
- Ensuring **appropriate support people** are available to support community-engaged art projects in different contexts (i.e., community partner staff person, social worker, etc.)

Promotional support:

- Creating a **shared online calendar** for community-engaged artists to list their events to promote them to the public, avoid overlap and conflict with other events, and enable artists to learn about and support one another's work
- Assisting with **marketing and promotion of events**
- Helping develop and sustain **cross-community and in-community partnerships**

According to research participants, this breadth and depth of support and infrastructure building work is desperately needed to ensure that community-engaged artists are able to stay in the North and continue serving the region's urban, rural and First Nation communities. The impacts outlined in this report clearly demonstrate the myriad positive effects these artists' practices continue to have on the communities they work with; at the same time, the supports outlined above require considerable capacity, time, energy and funding that is well beyond the scope of what individual community-engaged arts practitioners and organizations can or should be expected to offer.

Doing this work to support this vital practice is especially necessary now and moving into the immediate future, as the current Coronavirus pandemic and its aftermath are likely to further undermine the North's cultural infrastructure, just when the healing power of the arts is most needed.

"If the healing comes first, the economic prosperity will follow. You have to heal people in order for them to actually be able to support themselves and their families and their communities."

CHAPTER 11: OUR HIGHEST DREAM

Building on the data collected through the survey and interviews, on March 28 2020, 19 community-engaged artists were invited to take part in a virtual focus group exploring the question "what is your highest dream for community-engaged arts in Northern Ontario?" They were also invited to create a piece of art as another way to explore and share responses to this question. This focus group took place shortly after the Coronavirus pandemic took hold in Ontario, and all of the participants had been socially isolating for a number of weeks. As such, many of the responses also speak to their vision of how community-engaged arts practice might shift, evolve and contribute to community rebuilding efforts in a post-pandemic world.

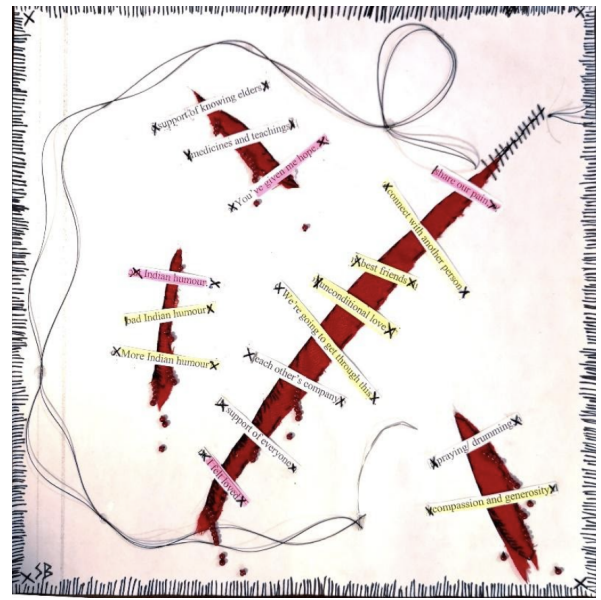
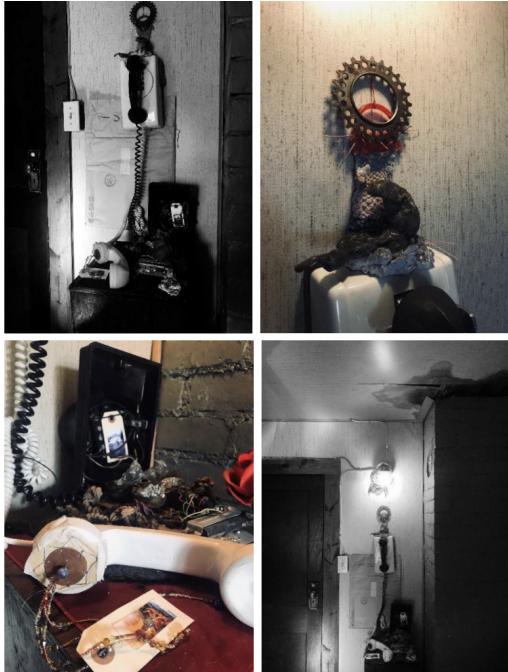
A sample of the artworks created and shared with us are included below - the rest, along with the artists' descriptions of their works, are included in Appendix A of this report. The following selected statements reflect some of the views and perspectives shared by participants in the

focus group session - the rest are included in Appendix B of this report. The artworks and statements shared here have been randomly selected and do not necessarily correspond with the image/text closest to them.

Please note: participating artists provided Thinking Rock with permission to use images of their artwork in this report. The artists retain the copyright and thus ownership of their work. These images should not be extracted from the report and used without the consent of the artist as they are copyright protected. Should a portion of the report that includes the art work be utilized by another author, the artist should be credited with the work along with citing Thinking Rock.

“The project we’ve been working on for a number of years looks at how all of these things are all interconnected and all part of the same thing. My mum’s a counselor and we knew early on that we really needed her in the room with us when we were exploring certain questions. We also knew that bringing an elder in to do a land acknowledgement or blessing and then they leave the room is not what we wanted at all. We wanted to have as many people who hold different medicine as possible in the room at that time. And be aware that how all those medicines are an integral part of the whole. I was very aware that it’s going to take more than a lifetime to understand myself as a dance artist what my relationship is to my dad who hunts or fishes or crafts....what is the relationship between all of those things and where does an artistic process even begin? That’s what I’m really dreaming of, is that we really listen and respond and move forward with everything that we have to help make this the world that we really want to live in.”

“My biggest dream for community arts is akin to art therapy, but I’m not a mental health professional and I’m not wanting to step into that world. Just from my perspective as an artist, my biggest dream is us healing ourselves by all bringing our medicine together through the arts. It’s something I’ve been thinking about a lot in terms of Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. Where I live I do still see a lot of racism and division happening, but what does bring people together from all different walks of life is the arts. Doing community arts together and building things together you can really see the talents and the medicines that people hold themselves that they can bring together to create a beautiful piece of art, to help bring each other to a new level of awareness, to heal each other spiritually, physically, mentally, emotionally. That’s the big power of what we do for this community. I’d like to see us learn more from that to help us use it in an even more effective way.”



“Especially dealing with a covid 19 world, we are going to be dealing with a lot of trauma. And I think that’s one thing that can’t be ignored and forgotten about...What needs to happen is people coming together and working together, not taking one from the other but working as a team. The fact is that you can’t even mention art therapy in a grant to any of the big funders...and that’s unfortunate because they need to be hand in hand. They can’t always be kept separate.”

“The pandemic and the subsequent response to it has really emphasized the tremendous loss of voice that we have experienced as individuals and communities and as people living in the world. I see the process of colonization is very much ongoing and I was thinking about all of the things that make it so difficult to have that voice, the incredible fear that’s associated with it. To me art is that safe place to go into, it’s the porthole where it’s safe to be in and safe to express yourself, say whatever hard things that are on your mind or in your heart. That’s my biggest wish for community-engaged arts, is that we grow this safe place for voices to come out in every form, whether it’s a visual voice or an audible voice.”

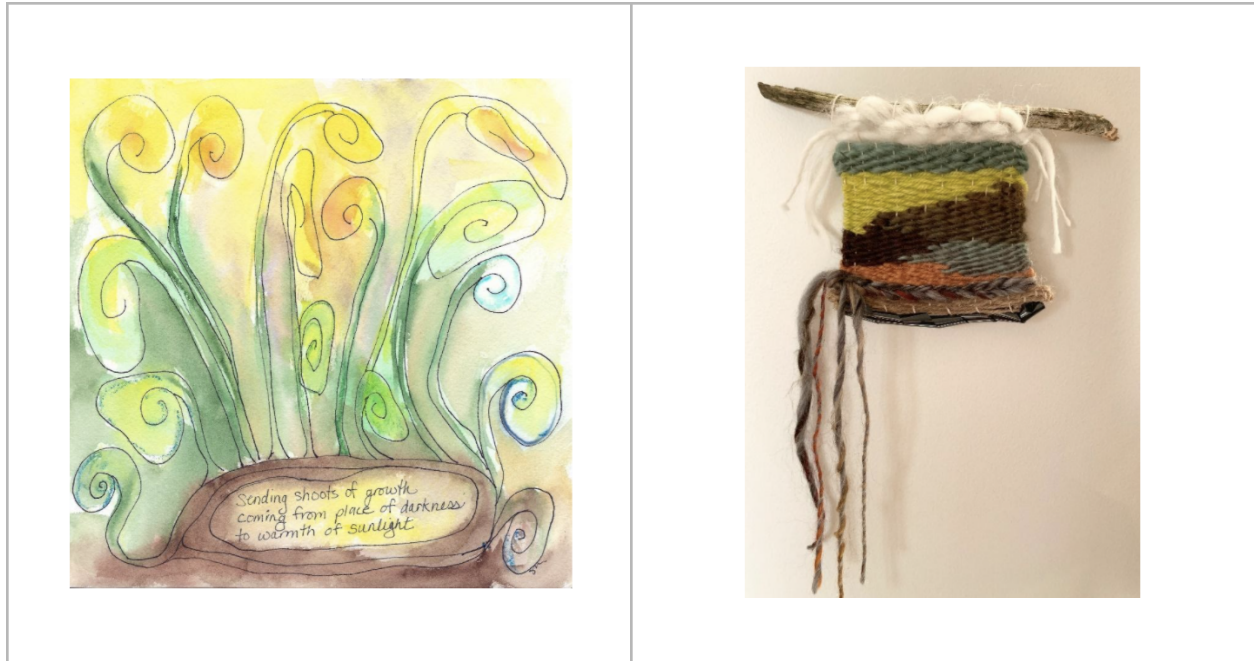


"I feel that all people have something to share and stories that are authentically theirs. And that our job as community-engaged artists is just to get rid of the debris that's in our society...those thoughts and ideas that some people are not worthy of sharing while others are. Or some people are worthy of having a voice where others are not. What's beautiful about artistic engagement is it really just bypasses all that. It's really just creating openings for expression, and for individual wisdom (which we all hold) and collective wisdom. It really is expansive is what it is, as opposed to limiting. With the Coronavirus situation if we're brave and if we're strong and if we're able to be clear about what is next we can create a culture where it isn't a special situation where people get to be creative - it's just part of everyday life."

"I wrote a haiku to go with my artwork. My artwork is a metaphor of a garden and I am a gardener. And I used the metaphor of a garden because I'm hopeful that community-engaged art will grow and change for the better after the pandemic."

*Sending shoots of growth
Coming from place of darkness
To warmth of daylight*

And that's my feeling of what's happening now, I really do feel like maybe there will be great, better change especially in community-engaged arts for vulnerable people who are so in need right now."



CHAPTER 12: TO WHOM DO WE TELL THE STORY OF OUR STORIES?

In addition to clearly outlining the impacts and challenges involved with leading community-engaged arts practice in the Northern context, the needs and solutions required to support this work, and their highest dreams for how this practice can evolve in the near and distant future, the artist participants were able to confidently identify who they wanted their stories to be shared with.

The majority of participants felt that it would be most important to share this story with stakeholders from other sectors, including:

- Local Funders (Community Foundations, Municipalities, Chief and Councils)
- Economic Development Groups (Economic Development Corporations, Community Development Corporations, FedNor, NOHFC)
- City planners, municipal leaders and staff
- Policy experts (ie., Northern Policy Institute, Ontario Nonprofit Network)
- Private Businesses / Potential Corporate Sponsors
- Traditional Indigenous organizations that engage in creative community work (eg., Ojibwe Cultural Foundation, Weengushk Film Institute)
- Small businesses with similar values to collaborate with on projects (eg., health and wellness)

- Compatible agencies, nonprofits and charities that do community development work (eg., March of Dimes, shelters, housing, addictions services)
- Education and higher education institutions
- Health centres and hospitals

A second key group that was identified as needing to hear this story was all levels of government, including:

- Municipal leaders (ie., mayors, city councillors, city staff)
- Chief and Councils and relevant Band Departments
- All regional MPs and MPPs
- Relevant federal ministries (ie., Ministry of Northern Affairs; Ministry of Canadian Heritage; Ministry for Women and Gender Equality and Rural Economic Development)
- Relevant provincial ministries (ie., Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture; Ministry of Energy, Northern Development and Mines)

Some artists were also keen to communicate this story to others within the arts sector, including:

- Key policy makers and influencers (eg., Mass Culture, the Ontario Arts Council, the Canada Council for the Arts, Canadian Heritage);
- Local artists working in other disciplines that can connect to community-engaged arts as partners and collaborators;
- Other artists and arts organizations within and beyond the North that are doing community-engaged arts well, to learn from and partner with (eg., Mindful Makers in Thunder Bay, which has transformed from an arts organization into a sustainable arts service organization);
- Local cultural organizations (eg., local museums, art galleries, Indigenous Friendship Centres, etc.) to partner and collaborate with

Lastly, it was identified that it would be important to share this story with other non-arts funders, including Canadian Heritage and the Ontario Trillium Foundation. It was noted that it is particularly important for these funders to have representatives visit communities and experience programs and projects in person, instead of relying on applications alone to learn about the work. It was also noted that it would be helpful to ensure there is artist representation integrated into their decision making processes (ie., on local OTF Grant Review Teams).

CHAPTER 13: HOW DO WE SHARE THE STORY OF OUR STORIES?

For some participating artists, the important question was less about who this story is told to, and more about how those stakeholders are engaged as listeners, and how to ensure this story rises above the noise - especially during these pandemic times.

Questions were raised about how to overcome constraints on people's time, how to demonstrate the impacts in ways that are directly relevant to the fields and sectors they are trying to reach, and how to incentivize those that they would like to take up residence with them in the work.

It was suggested that community-engaged arts practitioners find ways to raise their collective voice by participating in local, regional and national advocacy efforts and create knowledge mobilization channels – noting that many people have the skill set and connections to lead that work, and that they need to get better at creating those connections and starting those conversations. Finding specific champions and allies working within the institutions and groups they are looking to engage and allowing them to share this story effectively with their peers was another proposed approach. Another suggestion was to use community-engaged art approaches and projects to engage cross-sector stakeholder groups in the process of learning about and investing in the work, and to approach it less like business investment and more like a collaborative project that brings multiple benefits to community wellbeing.

Regardless of how this work is shared, participants emphasized that what is truly needed is systemic, structural, foundational change that shifts thinking about the importance and role of community-engaged arts in our rural and First Nation communities in the north.

CHAPTER 14: WHAT IS THE NEXT CHAPTER?

Before publishing this report, participating artists will be given the opportunity to review it in full and ensure that it accurately represents their viewpoints and perspectives. It will also be shared with members of the Steering Committee for their review and feedback.

Following this, the final version of the written report will be shared with each of the participating artists and the Steering Committee members, who will be encouraged to share it with their networks. A more condensed and visually appealing version of the report will then be designed, featuring infographics and photos that immediately convey the key points while encouraging the reader to dive deeper with the full report.

Following this, advice will be sought from policy and advocacy experts within our shared networks about how best to proceed with disseminating and communicating the report to the stakeholder groups identified in Chapter 7.

Some potential communication and dissemination strategies could include:

- Mailing a package with the full report and shorter version to all stakeholders, along with a request to set up follow-up phone conversations about the report's findings;
- Advising artists in each Northern region how to engage local decision makers in a conversation about the report's findings;
- Sending the report with a press release to major media outlets across the region to raise awareness about the findings with the general public;
- Planning one or multiple virtual or in-person presentations and facilitated conversations with cross-sector stakeholder groups from across the region;
- Hosting conversations with community-engaged artists from rural and Indigenous contexts across Canada to share findings and explore commonalities and differences within our experiences, and learn how we might combine efforts;
- Sharing the results of the report through podcasts, webinars and online resource centres through provincial and national partner organizations (ie., Mass Culture, Ontario Nonprofit Network)

Most likely a combination of these and similar approaches will be used to communicate the findings of this report to those who need to hear it. The authors of this report intend to be innovative, creative and persistent in sharing this information as far and wide as possible.

The authors of this report also hope that in doing this, they will be able to start a regional, provincial and possibly national conversation about the importance of the community-engaged art form; the incredible impacts it is having on the communities it serves; the resilience, innovation and passion demonstrated by the artists who continue to practice this work against great odds; and how each of the stakeholders they connect with and the communities and groups they represent would benefit from supporting this work and ensuring it continues to not only exist, but flourish.

CONCLUSION

In closing, given the precarious and unsustainable nature of the community-engaged arts sector across Northern Ontario, it is possible that the pandemic may have pushed this practice to a precipice: from here the work may either be crushed under the weight of the economic and social challenges presented by the pandemic... or it will be recognized for its healing, community-building and economically-beneficial qualities by a host of new cross-sector partners, funders and community leaders and be supported in taking up and playing a central role in rebuilding and reimagining our rural and remote communities and First Nations as healthier, more connected, more equitable and more creative places for people to live, work and play.

As one participant phrased it, going forward we have the opportunity to support *“that creative spirit which is fundamental in our survival and...not [go] back to the way it was before....[but] move forward with art and creativity and build our spirits in a more healthy way.”*

THE END

(OR HOPEFULLY, THE BEGINNING...!)

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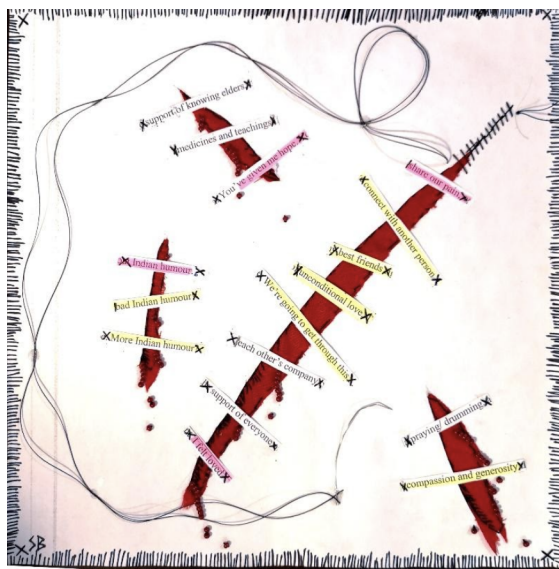
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APPENDIX A

Additional Focus Group Artwork responses to the question “What is your highest dream for community-engaged arts in Northern Ontario?”

A focus group, consisting of 19 community-engaged artists, took place on April 24, 2020. Participants were asked: What is your highest dream for community-engaged arts? The following are their creative responses, some with and some without accompanying written statements, that emerged from sharing their experiences with each other. Please note: participating artists provided Thinking Rock with permission to use images of their artwork and song lyrics in this report. The artists retain the copyright and thus ownership of their work. These images and lyrics should not be extracted from the report and used without the consent of the artist as they are copyright protected. Should a portion of the report that includes the art work or lyrics be utilized by another author, the artist should be credited with the work along with citing Thinking Rock.

1. We’re going to get through this



Materials: Black beading thread, red size 13 beads, red fabric, black fine point marker, super glue, beading needle size 11, old script.

This piece that I’m calling “We’re going to get through this” is an expression of my highest dream for community arts which is community arts as a platform where we can all bring together our medicines and contribute to the healing of each other, ourselves and our communities through connection and creation. I truly believe that the arts are healing and putting them in a community context provides an amazing opportunity to learn from and support one another, and to connect on a level we never would if we were just neighbours or just passing each other on the street.

I love taking cliché images and ideas and putting them in a new context. Part of the reason I like to do this is because clichés are instantly recognizable to most people, and therefore they can make a piece really easy to understand or at least to get the idea of. However, my pieces always hold much more meaning under the surface, if one takes the time to really see. The 4 wounds, which scream cliché to me, are representative of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual damage.

The “bandages” are snippets of an old script from a show that was created collaboratively. As I was working on cutting out the most healing phrases from this script, I realized I was partaking in a very literal version of something that always occurs more figuratively for me when I’m creating a show with others. Throughout the process of building a show, I always learn new things that help me on my

journey. Whether it is a song, a philosophy, or a new perspective, all of these things are healing, and I may never have come across them if I had not engaged with my community to build this show.

The bandages are meant to represent the healing that can come from the medicines of your community members, especially in a community arts context. The purpose of having the bandages juxtaposed with the stitching of the wounds is to express that the bandaging is a first step in the healing process. The bandages were needed to stop the bleeding and begin the healing, and now you as an individual must take that medicine and use it to stitch yourself up so you can heal fully.

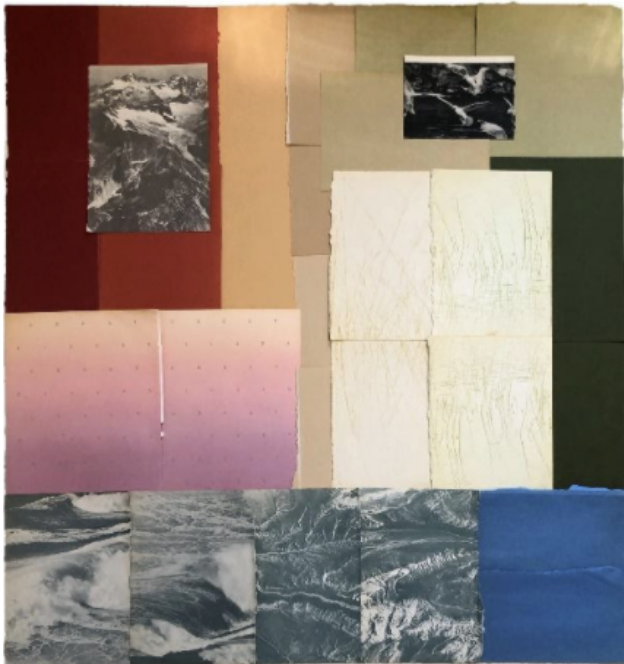
2. Untitled



3. Untitled



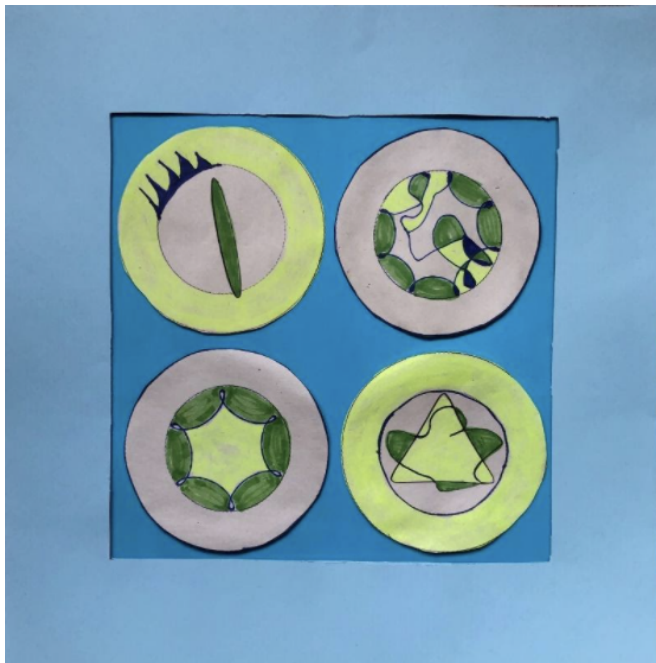
4. Untitled



5. Spinning Community From Lost Threads



6. Corona Window



In this artwork, I was exploring my notion of community-engaged art, especially at this time of pandemic. I have noticed how art, especially window art, is being used widely to realize the slogan, “We are all in this together.” As I walk through my neighbourhood, I see many painted windows and window displays, as neighbours try to connect and show solidarity, all the while remaining physically distant. I have wanted to create a work of window art, too. Another thing I have been fascinated about is the idea of “corona”. I imagine a corona as a beautiful thing; the word makes me think of a halo. Pictures of the virus likewise show it as a very beautiful thing. So, I’ve been working with geometrical figures, trying to create some sacred geometry to help me find resonant meaning at and of this time. The piece I am sending, in image of, I call

“Corona Window”. I’m attaching two images, one of the work itself, and another of the work in situ, on my window sill. It is colourful in both directions, as I worked with transparent and translucent materials.

7. Thoughts on Growth



Materials: Permanent and water-based markers

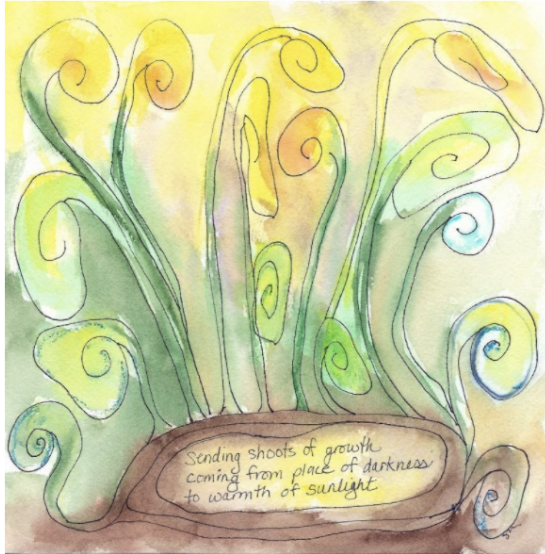
Created in response to the focus group question, “What is your highest dream for community arts?”, this piece is a meditation on the idea of greater sustainable growth in the commitment to and practice of arts/art-making in private, public and community sectors. It is a reflection upon the need for funders to be more welcoming to the inclusion of expressive arts, creative arts and art therapy professionals when considering funding applications for community-arts programming. Such recognition from funders would go a long way to acknowledging the specialized skill set of such professionals that make them uniquely suited to working with individuals

seeking emotional resiliency and interconnectedness with their communities. It would also serve to protect and educate the public as to the various roles of the arts – separating “art education” and “art as a tool for greater self-understanding” as distinct from “engaging with the arts in a purely therapeutic manner under the guidance of a trained mental health practitioner”.

8. Untitled

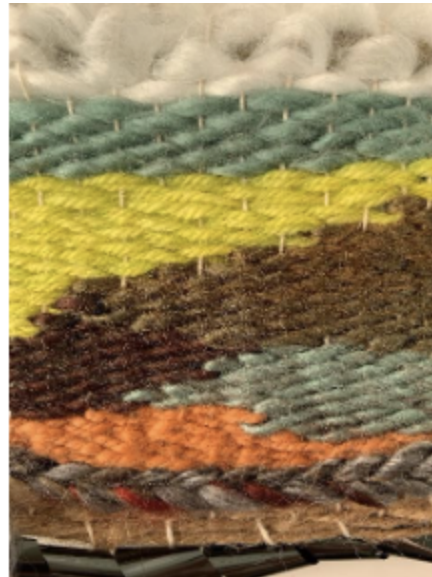


9. Untitled



I had debated on combining the poetry and painting into one piece and if I had to do it over again, I would separate them especially after receiving this message from a friend and poet: "Although in this case it is attached to the painting and self-explanatory, it's the kind of poem that could hold so many other meanings to other readers. Who hasn't had a dark period in their life and then risen up? That kind of rebirth is always done in small ways, sending out a small hope or an email or anything else you can imagine to grow out and past the darkness".

10. Untitled



To conceptualize an artwork in response to the question, I started by writing to imagine answers from each of my five senses. Just intuitively, not overthinking it. This led to the creation of a small weaving to symbolize an integration of ideas and practices new and old, familiar and unknown. To me, acknowledging the strength in this interconnectedness and finding ways to welcome and support collaboration

across disciplines and differences is what makes community-engaged arts powerful. With all of that in mind, I made the weaving using materials I had on hand, some chosen for their colours, others chosen for what they represent (like the AV tape). The loose ends are meant to reflect both the unfinished nature of process-based things and the ripple of effect of meaningful community work.

My highest dream for community-engaged arts in Northwestern Ontario...

looks like interconnectedness on a strong foundation with robust financial support. It's thoughtfully rooted in the interconnections of our northern context: landscapes, geographies, peoples.

smells like *petrichor*, that post-rain smell signaling a release of stale ideas and stagnant ways of working. They've been washed away and replaced a rejuvenated sense of curiosity and desire for exploration.

feels like busy hands and heart-led work, cooperation not competition. It's a supportive community of practice that enables inquiry, rich collaboration and fulfilling mentorship.

sounds like whatever is happening in the moment. Right now, it's my felt-tip black pen scrawling excited words quickly on thick paper. Soon, it will be artist voices connecting across a geographic expanse. It sounds like idea exchanges and story swapping, laughter and weeping.

tastes like something comforting, and like something unfamiliar. Like good coffee on a slow morning, and new flavours we are yet to experience.

11. Safe Place

(song written and performed at "Show and Share" follow-up meeting to the focus group, May 8/20)

There were words I could speak,

But they terrified me.

Sometimes I could cut,

Sometimes you would bleed.

And then you would run,

To escape from me.

So I learned not to say,

All the things that I wanted,

In my mouth they would stay,

And my soul it grew haunted.

There were moves I could make, (but)

I was afraid they would move me,

And I wasn't sure,

If that maybe might break me.

And all the dark places,

That this moving might take me.

So I learned not to move,

All those ways that I wanted,

And my body grew stiff,

And my soul, more haunted.

My heart it grew weak,
And my rage it grew stronger.
Cause I could not speak,
or move any longer.
Till I found a way,
the time and the space,
to move how I wanted
and say what I'd say,
I put it to music,
And I said it in song,
And I felt my pulse,
And I danced along.

...And you found it beautiful,
Not scary at all,
You didn't run,
I didn't fall.
Cause I found a way,
the time and the space,
to move how I wanted
and say what I'd say,
I put it to music,
And I said it in song,
And I felt my pulse,
And I danced along.

APPENDIX B

Additional Focus Group Responses to the question “What is your highest dream for community-engaged arts in Northern Ontario?”

“I was thinking about the connection between the water, our life, and our spirits. I said ok for myself what I’ve been looking for is developing the relationship with art and my own self-realization and my transformation and growth, my healing, but that’s also related to our community’s healing. One of the things I can do as an individual is to become a birchbark canoe holder. [My father in law] was saying that’s one of the things he wants to pass on and make sure it stays alive. It reminds me a lot of how art encompasses that whole realm of the funny, all of our makers and storytellers and healers, it encompasses all that. That’s what I hope....that we can help support people to realize their own niche pockets of dreams, whether it’s stories or birchbark canoes or jokes or laughter.”

“For the last month or so I’ve been thinking about access. Coming from a community arts background I always found there was so much magic in those spaces in taking care of each other. This is the first time in a long time I’ve felt that connection and I’m really appreciative. We’re all alone but these kinds of opportunities to come together and talk about what matters to us and what’s important - with a little bit but not too much structure - are really important and powerful moments.”

“What’s being born for me personally as a maker and as a human being...this pause is allowing me time to remember who I am and where I come from and to value these practices, these hand crafts that in the wider community of artists I work in sometimes aren’t valued as much as some of those visual or performance practices that people have gone through immense amount of training for. I’ve liked being cocooned in being in this place of making and knowing and connecting and finding ways to connect with others too. We don’t all make art in the same ways. All of our voices and ways of making and knowing and sharing are all meaningful and valuable so that’s how we can connect together...like a weaving.”

“One of my philosophies is that people have come and share their arts practice in all the realms that we understand art, and share those with our students and also send our students out so they can have an experience outside of [our organization] - there’s this thing when you stay home too much you get too comfortable. You have to go out and live the life an artist is going to be living, I have to leave my community to go out and attend that and receive that. And then once you learn that you can come home, you learned enough that you can start sharing that. It’s a circular kind of mentality. For me it’s all about learning, you can never stop learning.”

“I think my dream for community engaged arts is less of a separation or delineation between art that is community engaged and art period. If art reflects life and contemporary art pushes or blurs the boundary between art and life, then I think community arts is simply a progression. I admittedly ignorantly at first perceived community engaged arts as perhaps a little ‘lowbrow’ and not as serious but I think the past year has reminded me that art is for everyone - maybe not all art is for every person, but much of it is for a wide audience and we should be wary of elitism and becoming inaccessible or closed off. I guess what I’m saying is I hope community arts gains momentum and status and is considered equal to any other art practice.”

"I always think of my family last and that's really saddening but eye opening too. I left my community when I was 16 years old to go out and go to an arts school and then I went to post secondary to another art school and when I came back I realized there's so much art here and it's happening all the time and I thought, why don't I put that much...like why is that not valued at the same level? So that's what my highest dream for community-engaged arts, is that people hold on to what they have in their own communities."

"One thing I've been working on very slowly I've been doing this little stitching. It's me trying to find the golden thread by using golden thread to repair and stitch onto this cheesecloth type fabric. It helps me to think through the idea of: is this even a time of repairing? Because if things don't actually fall to ashes how can we rise from the ashes? I have this theory of how things will be rebuilt next to include the voices of those people who have been living in the cracks this whole time and advocating this whole time and saying 'this is what we need'. It's kind of like this transformation but yet it's kind of about the bleeding that's happening right now, to do with all the wounds that are opening."