

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Art and the World After This

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by David Maggs



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This report is about the arts in the world after this. The world after COVID-19, the world after colonialism and globalization, the world after the digitization of society, and the world after climate change. In other words, it is about the arts in the world after the Enlightenment: a time in history when it was assumed we could reduce the world to objective facts, predict the behaviours of natural systems, and intervene in life bit by bit, in ways that would secure the results we desired and eliminate the ones we did not. Today, the world of linear, causal relationships governed by prediction and control is giving way to a world of emergence and inherent unpredictability. What does this have to do with art, you may wonder? More, I believe, than we can begin to imagine, yet just enough to recognize an opportunity, and prepare.

THE FOUR DISRUPTIONS

Through the generous support of the Metcalf Foundation, I have spent the past seven months exploring disruption and transformation in Canada's non-profit arts sector. Initially assuming this meant exploring the impacts of a pandemic, I realized quickly that we are not facing the effects of one disruption, but four: **the disruption of activity**, stemming from COVID-19; **the disruption of society**, emerging from rising social unrest; **the disruption of industry**, based on the digital revolution; and **the disruption of world**, rooted in the sustainability crisis.

If our sector had hoped to get out of this with some social distancing and an equity policy, we were mistaken. Deep transformative change is gripping our world and our sector. To respond proactively to our own problems and to contribute meaningfully to challenges in the wider world, a significant portion of our activity needs to shift from a paradigm of ‘production and presentation’ to one driven by innovation. And yet there is, perhaps, nothing *less* innovative one can possibly do in this moment than call for innovation. It is about as useful as declaring the need for ‘problem-solving’ in the middle of a plane crash. The challenge, of course, is to identify exactly what kind of innovation we require, and how to cultivate it. These are the questions this report aims to address.

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As so many arts leaders in Canada know too well, these disruptions of activity, society, industry, and world threaten to cast us into an endless game of ‘whack-a-mole’ should we persist in trying to address them one at a time as separate challenges. In this, we find ourselves exhausted by continuous crisis-hopping that serves to exploit our weaknesses as a sector and leave us looking uniquely incapable relative to the rest of society. However, if we can manage to integrate these disruptions into a coherent whole, might that have the opposite effect? Might it play to our strengths and leave us looking uniquely capable instead? If so, what might this integration look like, and could it help clarify the innovation paradigm we need?

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As I explore in **Part One** of the report, the disruptions of activity, society, industry, and world carry strong implications of digital innovation, pluralism, social innovation, and uncertainty. Stitch these together and we find ourselves within the emerging realm of *complexity* — a method of understanding the world not through its intrinsic properties and objective facts, but in terms of relationships, intersections, networks, emergence, and systems. In fashioning such an idea into the innovation paradigm that is both begged for by our current disruptions and capable of mobilizing the unique capacities of our sector, we might take inspiration from the creative economy—an innovation paradigm that repositioned the art-society relationship in compelling ways over the past two decades. In seeking the innovation paradigm we need, then, can we ask what the creative economy looks like for Canada, post-pandemic? What, for example, is the creative economy + climate justice + reconciliation with Indigenous communities?

One answer is **the complexity economy**: an integrated conceptual framework that allows us to serve a dual agenda. First, through such a framework we can engage the implications of our layered disruptions synergistically, so that responding to one disruption *increases* our ability to respond to the others; second, we ready ourselves for a role in society that is more essential, applied, and accountable, that is, where adopting a complexity framework converts some of our sector's latent capacities into vital leadership qualities for our encompassing social contexts more broadly. In this regard we adopt a framework that aims to get our own house in order while enhancing our capacity to fix up the neighbourhood at the same time.

THREE QUESTIONS

To prepare ourselves for this idea of a complexity economy, **Part Two** of this report considers three questions:

What are we doing here anyway? This first question is an attempt to identify an essential value proposition. In other words, as we prepare for processes of deep transformative change, what lies at the heart of what we do? What is it that we cannot afford to lose? How do we ensure both our coming transformation and our sense of social purpose centres itself around a basic capacity of creative practice so we don't throw the baby out with the bathwater in the name of innovation?

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Is this an ecosystem or a zoo? The coming shift from a paradigm of 'production and presentation' to one featuring innovation will require us to shift from a sector to a system by adopting a highly integrated systems-approach. Although we constantly refer to ourselves as an ecosystem or an ecology, is it worth asking how strong are the systems dynamics in our sector? How much is this a functioning feature of our sector as it stands? Might we conceive of ourselves in an increasingly systemic form? And what are the implications of doing so? Here, we'll consider how 'rewilding' practices from ecology, used to restore ecosystem health, might be applied to Canada's cultural ecology as well.

... how strong are the systems dynamics in our sector?

Can we learn our way out of this? A final question considers the broad issue of our sector's capacity to learn. First, this issue is raised in terms of how we relate to the future. In proposing we shift from standard predictive forecasting to strategic foresight, our relationship to the future grows fundamentally responsive and emergent through a process of learning and evolving. Here, we turn to the future not to determine where we want to go, but rather what we need to become. The second learning strategy explored here, is the emerging relationship between art and research and development (R&D) and its potential to restructure our relationship to ourselves and our society. That is, a framework for reinventing how we operate as a sector and how our sector operates within its encompassing systems.

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In considering the practical implications of this research, I am increasingly aware that I am peddling a paradox to the sector. For the relationship between art and society that emerges in what follows, I am seeking ways for us to move ambitiously into more applied and accountable relationships with various kinds of communities (beyond our own). This awakens the dangers of ‘instrumentalizing the arts’—turning ourselves into various tools to be applied to economic and social goals, serving political agendas, and, all too often, straying from our core capacities. In resistance to this, the report seeks a conceptual and practical clarity regarding how we can remain thoroughly anchored in our core capacities, such that we might increase our ability to serve a more applied and accountable role in society, but *as artists making art*, working with the aesthetic, while growing adept at identifying the arts-shaped holes in our worlds and the methods by which we meaningfully engage them.

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The goal of this report is to move quickly and synthetically, pulling together diverse themes in order to recognize opportunities, illustrate significance, and prepare ourselves in haste. More sketch than blueprint, the aim is not to arrive at a conclusive list of ‘to-dos’ but rather open a way of thinking in hopes of awakening an emergent, experimental dynamic that plays out across interested actors. Through this, I hope we will discover that we are surprisingly capable of tackling the issues that have been crippling us long before a pandemic hit, while demonstrating a unique and expanding value to a society struggling with its own challenges of complexity—climate change, poverty gaps, cultural pluralism, collapsing civic society, etc. Here, rather than discovering ourselves as an arts sector down on its luck hoping public funding will carry us into the unforeseeable future despite our unsustainable form, we might find ourselves boldly optimistic instead, standing on the edge of an art-society relationship teeming with unprecedented strength, breadth, and necessity in a post-pandemic world.

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