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Participatory Governance and Community-Based Research at Mass Culture
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Article abstract

This article uses the national arts research network Mass Culture (MC) as a case study for assessing the strengths and limitations of participatory governance and community-based research for reimagining and enacting better futures in the Canadian arts sector. MC is currently the only digital network that takes such an approach to promote the equitable mobilization of arts research in Canada, which falls in line with broader trends and values associated with the participatory turn of cultural policy. At MC, this orientation is first reflected in the governance structure, which grew out of both grassroots processes and formal consultations involving key actors in the Canadian arts community. Here, I draw inspiration from Rosenau's (Rosenau & Czempiel, 1992) definition of governance to refer to MC's system of rule, which includes informal mechanisms such as intersubjective meanings, along with formally sanctioned regulations such as charters, terms of reference, etc. MC's approach is also activated by the methods through which it designs, implements, and evaluates cross-sectoral collaborative projects at the national level. By experimenting with various community-engaged methods tailored to each of its initiatives, MC seeks to build the relational and data infrastructures that are needed to ensure that the research it produces is both relevant and easily accessible to potential users, from practitioners, artists, academics, arts funders, and policymakers, to those working at the intersection of several professional roles. By providing an in-depth account of MC's emergence as a networked organization and by elaborating on its community-based approach to research, this article aims to contribute new knowledge about the value of various models of collaboration in the fields of cultural policy and cultural management.

Participatory Governance and Community-Based Research at Mass Culture

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Abstract: This article uses the national arts research network Mass Culture (MC) as a case study for assessing the strengths and limitations of participatory governance and community-based research for reimagining and enacting better futures in the Canadian arts sector. MC is currently the only digital network that takes such an approach to promote the equitable mobilization of arts research in Canada, which falls in line with broader trends and values associated with the participatory turn of cultural policy. At MC, this orientation is first reflected in the governance structure, which grew out of both grassroots processes and formal consultations involving key actors in the Canadian arts community. Here, I draw inspiration from Rosenau's (Rosenau & Czempiel, 1992) definition of governance to refer to MC's system of rule, which includes informal mechanisms such as intersubjective meanings, along with formally sanctioned regulations such as charters, terms of reference, etc. MC's approach is also activated by the methods through which it designs, implements, and evaluates cross-sectoral collaborative projects at the national level. By experimenting with various community-engaged methods tailored to each of its initiatives, MC seeks to build the relational and data infrastructures that are needed to ensure that the research it produces is both relevant and easily accessible to potential users, from practitioners, artists, academics, arts funders, and policymakers, to those working at the intersection of several professional roles. By providing an in-depth account of MC's emergence as a networked organization and by elaborating on its community-based approach to research, this article aims to contribute new knowledge about the value of various models of collaboration in the fields of cultural policy and cultural management.

Keywords: Mass Culture, cultural policy, community-based research, participatory governance

Résumé : Cet article utilise le réseau national de recherche artistique Mass Culture (MC) comme étude de cas pour évaluer les forces et les limites de la gouvernance participative et de la recherche communautaire pour réimaginer et mettre en œuvre de meilleurs avenirs dans le secteur artistique canadien. MC est actuellement le seul réseau numérique qui adopte une telle approche pour promouvoir la mobilisation équitable de la recherche artistique au Canada, ce qui s'inscrit dans les tendances et les valeurs plus larges associées au tournant participatif de la politique culturelle. Chez MC, cette orientation se reflète d'abord dans la structure de gouvernance, qui est issue à la fois de processus populaires et de consultations formelles impliquant des acteurs clés de la communauté artistique canadienne. Je m'inspire ici de la définition de la gouvernance de Rosenau (Rosenau & Czempiel, 1992) pour faire référence au système de règles de MC, qui comprend des mécanismes informels tels que les significations intersubjectives, ainsi que des réglementations formellement sanctionnées telles que les chartes, les termes de référence, etc. L'approche de MC est également activée par les méthodes par lesquelles elle conçoit, met en œuvre et évalue des projets de collaboration intersectorielle au niveau national. En expérimentant diverses méthodes d'engagement communautaire adaptées à chacune de ses initiatives, MC cherche à construire les infrastructures relationnelles et de données nécessaires pour garantir que la recherche qu'elle produit est à la fois pertinente et facilement accessible aux utilisateurs potentiels, qu'il s'agisse de praticiens, d'artistes, d'universitaires, de financeurs du secteur artistique, de décideurs politiques ou de personnes travaillant à l'intersection de plusieurs rôles professionnels. En fournissant un compte rendu détaillé de l'émergence de MC en tant qu'organisation en réseau et en développant son approche communautaire de

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la recherche, cet article vise à apporter de nouvelles connaissances sur la valeur des différents modèles de collaboration dans les domaines de la politique culturelle et de la gestion culturelle.

Mots clés : Mobilisation culturelle, politique culturelle, recherche communautaire, gouvernance participative

Introduction

In the past decade, the field of cultural policy has witnessed a renewed interest in ideas and practices of cultural democracy (Hadley & Belfiore, 2018). As a cultural policy paradigm, "cultural democracy" emerged in the 1970s and recognized the right of every individual and community to be respected and to have a voice in the decisions affecting their lives—including cultural practices. Amongst other trends, it was associated with the evolution of governance models that prioritize deliberative, democratic, and participatory structures and engage with issues of community, inclusion, and equality (Bonet & Négrier, 2018; Marx, 2019). In other words, cultural democracy posits that individual and collective cultures can be nurtured at the same time with cultural policies that encourage the active participation of individuals (Zask, 2016). A central idea supporting this paradigm is people's entitlement, or right to culture, which was sharply eroded by the neoliberalization[i] of cultural policy (Davies & Selwood, 2012). Today, the revitalization of cultural democracy as a policy orientation can be illustrated by various activations, including but not limited to international policies that recognize cultural resources as global commons (e.g., UNESCO's Mondiacult, 2022), public discourses calling for a return to a sense of culture as a public good (Verjee in Mass Culture, 2023) and as a "participatory entitlement" (Banks & O'Connor, 2020), the proliferation of governance models experimenting with forms of distributed leadership, and the increasing number of events, research activities, and publications centered on cultural democracy (Hadley & Belfiore, 2018). This article aims to contribute to the fields of cultural policy and cultural management by using the Canadian arts research network Mass Culture (MC) as a case study for assessing the strengths and limitations of various modes of cross-sectoral collaboration. More specifically, the article focuses on (1) the processes that led to MC's emergence and institutionalization, (2) its participatory governance model and (3) its community-based approach to research.

There are several reasons why I chose MC as a case study for this research. First, MC is a value-based network that aims at grounding every dimension of its work within community. Over the past few years, the organization has experimented with the design, implementation, and evaluation of several community-engaged projects that each aims at the equitable mobilization of arts research in Canada. For example: in addition to piloting a community-based participatory research (CBPR) project in the context of its *Research-in-Residence (RinR)*: *Arts' Civic Impact* initiative, MC also developed a 10-month participatory convening project called *Arts Service Organizations (ASO): Positioning a Future Forward* in collaboration with its community members, which culminated in a national conference involving over 100 arts service organizations from across Canada in January 2023 at Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU).

To cultivate community involvement, the network utilizes a variety of resources, such as its participatory governance structure, which is made of five increasingly self-organizing Working Groups. MC's cultural governance model exemplifies a broader management trend observed in other local contexts in Canada. MC also uses strategies and resources such as advisory boards, surveys, online engagement tools, crowdsourcing, and polling, among others. This diversity of methods and approaches

present a range of opportunities to study collaboration in various contexts. Also, because MC is a national network looking to convene and connect individuals, organizations, and institutions across Canada, its projects differ in nature from more traditional community-engaged projects in terms of both scope and scale. For example, the *RinR* project mentioned above involved six emerging researchers from diverse ethnocultural backgrounds and geographical realities, along with over 15 community partners in Canada, including academics and universities, arts organizations, as well as local, provincial, and federal arts funders. To date, we know little about the challenges and benefits associated with such large and inclusive cross-sectoral collaboration models in the Canadian arts sector. This article aims at documenting and critically reflecting on key features of MC as a networked organization that draws on a community-based approach to research. This research endeavor is a first step prior to focusing, in the next months, on a more detailed assessment of several community-engaged methods used in MC's 2022-2023 programming.

This article, and the broader research from which it is drawn, are relevant for several reasons. In the Canadian arts sector, the current interweaving social, political, economic, technological, and environmental crises, which have been amplified by the global COVID-19 pandemic, have contributed to the resurgence of a discourse premised on the "imperative of transformative change" (Litzenberger, 2022). Many artists, academics and thought leaders have called to seize this historic moment as an opportunity to critically reflect on the unsustainable ways of working, being, relating to others, and valuing relationality that have become normalized in the cultural field (Verjee in Mass Culture, 2023; Maggs, 2021; Liztenberger, 2022). For Banks and O'Connor (2020), the emergence of a new imaginary of cultural work and its associated politics depends on a "wider hegemonic shift in social perspective, from post-industrial boosterism to social justice and a sustainable future". Campbell and Thomson (2022) have similarly highlighted how dominant knowledge systems must be challenged while space is made for new frameworks to emerge and be shared amongst social actors. According to them, the current hegemonic neoliberal narrative about the creative industries, which overemphasizes its contributions to economic growth and gross domestic product (GDP), is one such conceptual and ideological framework that needs to be challenged. The authors call for the co-creation and sharing of a new narrative celebrating stories that "speak to the creative process – including co-creation, community building, and collaboration" (2022, p.5).

Recent studies drawing on a relational approach have contributed to the study of collaboration dynamics in the Canadian arts sector. By looking at the arts sector through the lens of its underlying relationships, networks, intersections, systems, etc., this literature has for instance highlighted its embeddedness within localized networks of care and reciprocity, and its positive socio-cultural impacts in terms of health, social cohesion, sustainability, community engagement, and more (Alacovska & Bissonnette, 2021; Campbell, 2021; Maggs, 2021; Luka, 2022). For Luka (2022), there is great relevance in producing more in-depth studies on assessing what creative hubs and networks are concretely doing so we can build the nuanced understandings that are needed for policies to adequately support a fast-evolving sector that drives social change. Collaboration dynamics remain insufficiently documented, despite growing bodies of knowledge built on key concepts highlighting the cooperative networks that undergird artistic production and their positive socio-cultural impacts—such as the *art worlds* (Becker, 1982) and the *community economies* of the arts (Bain & McLean, 2013; Campbell, 2021; Luka, 2022; Gibson-Graham, n.d.).

A polysemic concept, the praxis of collaboration sits at the intersection of technological, economical, and sociological currents and may correspond to a wide range of features (Bonet & Négrier, 2018; Rifkin, 2000). For example, it can range from "providing information (reciprocally), to being heard (consultation), to having decision power, or to the phenomenon of co-production (co-creation), amongst others" (Bonet and Négrier, 2018, p.65). As many studies have shown, participation is a medium better depicted on a continuum. Generally celebrated by public actors as inherently positive, participatory processes have nevertheless been criticized for their potential to become increasingly ritualistic and bureaucratic, or for having conflicting implications—such as in the case of voluntary work (Bonet & Négrier, 2018; Brook, O'Brien & Taylor, 2021; Marx, 2019; Gourgues et al., 2022). In an empirical study of the participatory turn of public administration in France, Gourgues et al. have shown a proliferation of "participation professionals," such as facilitators, community consultants, and policy officers in the public sector, whose jobs have come to amount to "little more than the incessant production of events (meetings, encounters, sessions, and committees)," or the endless generation of records of such participatory activities (2022, p.1148). The authors highlight how participatory democracy has been rationalized through participatory arrangements that are closely compared, monitored and analysed, which serve to support and implement new arrangements without really questioning their meanings or concrete impacts on public action. Finally, the question of who gets to participate in these processes has drawn considerable attention, with empirical studies focused on the arts sector showing that participatory processes do not erase decision-making hierarchies (Marx, 2019; Walmsley, 2013), but also that models of participation might involve heterogeneous populations (Bonet and Négrier, 2018). Through an in-depth study of MC's participatory governance model and its community-based approach to research, I wish to generate new applied knowledge on the value and limitations of different modes of collaboration.

Methodology

This research project combines organizational ethnography with case study design. While the first refers to "the study of human lives in organizations, with a particular focus on the social culture underlying the process of organizing," the latter represents "a form of empirical and theoretical social investigation dedicated to the study of contemporary phenomena in natural contexts" (Côté-Boileau et al., 2020, pp. 1-2). Merging these two approaches provides combined methodological strengths that are particularly relevant to MC's emergence and organizational development by drawing on the experiences of the people who were involved in its creation, as well as those who contribute to support it, and to assess the potential and limitations of its community-based approach to research. As described by Côté-Boileau et al., these strengths include an in-depth closeness to competing organizational lives; situated and shared reflexive experiences of multiple field workers; timely, actionable, and contextualized knowledge production; and contextualized, multi-level interactions and variations (2020, p.9).

This paper aims to provide preliminary answers to the following questions:

- What is MC and how did it emerge as a networked organization?
- What characterizes its participatory governance structure?
- What characterizes its community-based approach to research?

From July 2022 to January 2023, qualitative data was collected on the characteristics and objectives of MC's community-engaged projects, as well as data on the lived experiences of MC's staff. I also collected critical feedback from MC's community members. This research is based on the triangulation of multiple data sources:

1. A document analysis of public sources, supplemented by materials and archives provided by MC
2. Participant observation during approximately 15 weekly meetings with MC's staff of approximately 60 minutes each
3. Participant observation during four of MC's community-engaged activities: the Play-Go-Round event on Arts' Civic Impacts (September 2022); the Climartathon, an arts and climate datathon (November 2022); a regional roundtable on assessing arts' impacts, hosted by MacEwan University in Edmonton (Alberta) in the context of the Researcher-in-Residence, Art's Civic Impact project (January 2023); and lastly, the Arts Service Organizations: Positioning a Future Forward initiative, including the national *ASO Convergence Conference* (January 23-24, 2023, Toronto, Ontario). In the last two events, I facilitated a series of 90-minute sessions on themes relating to community-engaged research in the Canadian arts sector.
4. Six in-depth interviews of 60-90 minutes each with members of MC's staff and regular program participants. The latter were approached based on their participation in the aforementioned projects. Here, participation is defined as any form of engagement in an activity hosted or co-facilitated by Mass Culture.

The research project from which this article is drawn is exploratory. Its empirical material is currently made of a limited dataset, which inevitably shapes the description and critical commentary of our research results. While this certainly constitutes an important limitation, the preliminary results that are presented and discussed in this article can nevertheless provide critical insight on MC's national model of research collaboration and cultural governance. In the next few months, more data will be collected and analyzed to complete this portrait. The results will be shared with MC's community, including its administrators, and will hopefully serve to inform the network's processes, organizational structure, and future programming.

This article is based on a 12-month postdoctoral research project that began in July 2022 at the University of Toronto Scarborough (UTSC). Funded by Mitacs, it was developed in partnership with Mass Culture and the Urban Just Transitions (UJT) Cluster of Scholarly Prominence at UTSC. While Mass Culture is the focus of this paper, one of the main objectives of this research project is to identify if, why and how MC's expertise in terms of community-engaged research could be adapted to UJT's place- and community-based participatory research (CPBR) project on just transitions in Scarborough (Toronto, Ontario). Finally, I wish to acknowledge that this article and this research project are both informed by the position I occupy as someone deeply embedded within MC, both before and during my research project. After being introduced to the network in 2018, I was contracted twice by MC and by the Centre for Free Expression (Toronto Metropolitan University) to contribute to its programming as a panelist and facilitator. Also, for

11 months prior to integrating MC as a postdoctoral fellow, I was a member of its Operations Group, which acts as its management board. This allowed me to establish a trusting relationship with MC, which was a great advantage in the context of a short, 12-month project. However, due to my proximity to MC's staff, it was sometimes challenging to transition from a professional working relationship to a researcher-participant relationship. My lack of previous experience with community-based research practices and certain ethnographic methods such as participant observation led me to seek mentorship from colleagues on several occasions—including from my postdoctoral advisor, Dr. Mary Elizabeth Luka. This was instrumental in keeping myself accountable, and in striving to enact "everyday ethics" (Loveless, 2019), or an ethics and practice of care (Luka & Millette, 2018) throughout the project.

What is Mass Culture?

MC was created in 2015 by a group of arts leaders[ii] who "recognized a distinct need for an organization whose sole responsibility is to generate a greater capacity for arts research" (MacKay, 2021). The identification of this gap followed the dissolution of the Canadian Conference for the Arts (CCA) in 2012, the independent umbrella organization representing individuals and organizations that once published bilingual periodicals, handbooks, directories, papers, and reports on the Canadian arts sector. Amongst the initial group members, there was a consensus that the development and enhancement of research capacity was critical for arts organizations to effectively participate in the creation of evidence-informed cultural policies, both individually and collectively. MC's name and approach were inspired by the 1949 Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Science—a large-scale public consultation process chaired by Vincent Massey, commonly known as the Massey Commission.[iii]

The emergence of a national network

The idea of MC as an arts research network was shaped and refined in backyard meetings in Toronto (Ontario). Members of the initial group created lists of key people in the Canadian arts sector who they thought should be approached to explore their interest in the network. According to our interviews, approximately 150 individuals were approached by the collective. They included arts leaders, but also academics, as well as executive directors, Canada Council for the Arts' board members, and more. As the network was gradually built, the group used these conversations to involve the arts community in decision-making regarding what the organization would look like, how it would be governed, and what its function would be in the sector. According to one research participant, this participatory approach helped foster a significant level of community support, along with a sense of belonging (Participant #5).

MC was officially incorporated as a cultural non-profit organization in 2016. Back then, the organization was supported only through sweat equity. Members of the initial group worked on building the network while working other full-time jobs. It received its first one-year project grant from the Toronto Arts Council in 2018 to continue hosting these community conversations in partnership with other arts organizations. The grant was used to support the co-design of 23 in-person gatherings across Canada that were documented and shared back with the sector on MC's website. At that time, the group also worked with the Ontario College of Art and Design's (OCAD) Strategic Foresight and Innovation students to design a convening model for the gatherings. MC then used this model to host the first larger convening event

at the Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF), which gathered approximately 60 persons. At that stage, no one knew if Mass Culture as an idea would survive after 2019.

> When we did that event at the OTF, I thought this was going to be a yearlong initiative and die. Like, I had no high hopes, I had no idea that this would continue to be what it is. It scared me to try and push for that much. I was just trying to bring people together and make them recognize that there was a huge gap that we needed to figure out how to fill. And also at that point, I didn't even really want Mass Culture to become an organization. I just wanted it to be a network and that's why we still try and make it as network-y as possible, because that's where our roots are from. And that's what made us who we are and built up our success. (Participant #4)

After its first convening event, MC started gaining more traction and quickly outgrew its initial organizational capacity. According to our interviews, these levels of interest and engagement can be partially explained by the economic conjuncture of the period between 2016 – 2021. During that period, the Canadian Liberal government under Justin Trudeau announced major investments in the cultural sector. The Canada Council for the Arts (CCA), an arm's length arts-funding body at the federal level, was able to double its budget through a 550M$ investment. This much-needed financial relief allowed a shift of focus in terms of advocacy led by arts organizations and sparked new energies for undertaking projects. These favourable conditions opened up possibilities for having deep conversations about the strategic orientations of the sector.

> All of a sudden it was like "Okay, now what? Now we have nothing to get around the table for anymore." And then these ideas started percolating up and people had new energy for things. And that's when we started talking about Mass Culture, because there was suddenly the space to talk about "Okay, well, what else is missing"? And Mass Culture intentionally created space for those more holistic conversations about the sector to occur. (Participant #4)

From these conversations, MC identified two major gaps that it sought to address as an organization. The first issue was a knowledge gap in terms of how and why research was being produced and disseminated in the arts sector. More specifically, the collective recognized that the sector had limited research capacity, and that research tended to be fragmented across disciplinary boundaries and jurisdictions (Participant #4). An internal document titled "What's Mass Culture's Story?" dating from 2019 reads, "There is no comprehensive source of information on Canada's arts and culture sector. As a result, information is siloed, reporting is inconsistent, and access to high-quality research metrics and insights about the ecosystem are not readily available" (Mass Culture, n.d.). A certain number of interrelated factors might have contributed to this situation: the structuring effect of funding programs based on a single-disciplinary logic; an unequal distribution of necessary skills and resources to conduct and share research across the sector; institutional precarity due to austerity episodes; and insufficient public investments in the arts and culture sector overall.

As a new organization, MC also sought to address the issue of fragmented resource repositories used by the sector, which was seen as a contributing factor to a somewhat deficient data infrastructure. This helps explain why Mass Culture (after an informal exchange on Facebook involving several Canadian ASOs representatives who expressed a desire for a community database where anyone from the Canadian arts community could contribute relevant resources) created the database Artifex[iv] in partnership with the Creative Hubs and Networks Mapping Initiative at UTSC, with support from the Critical Digital Methods Institute (CDMI). Partially funded by the CCA, the public database is meant to be a central information resource for anyone with an interest in the Canadian arts sector. It contains various types of resources (e.g., datasets; models and frameworks; tools, projects and programs; advocacy and policy; resource repositories; other resources) that were mostly collected during MC's datathons. Datathons are three-day events hosted in partnership with arts organizations where community members are invited to share resources on a particular theme.

As MC evolved into an arts research network, a turning point in its history was taking over the registered charity number of the Canadian Conference for the Arts in 2019. This allowed the network to gain further credibility as a research-focused organization. In terms of a business model, MC refrained from adopting a traditional membership model. It instead committed to serving the interests of an open and fluid community whose members would not have to pay a membership fee to benefit from its services or to participate in its programming.[v] This decision had deep implications for MC. First, it made community engagement and participation levels the main indicators used to assess the relevance of its programming. Second, it positioned issues such as burnout levels and overall apathy as major challenges to address on a continuous basis (Participant #4).

The shaping up of MC as "a precursor to what is more normalized now in terms of virtual organizations, multi-disciplinary organizations, multi-purpose organizations" (Participant #5) influenced its capacity to access arts funding. MC is not yet eligible to receive core funding at the federal level, while many local funding programs are inaccessible because they are structured based on a single-disciplinary logic. At the provincial level, MC has so far been unsuccessful at securing core funding. This keeps the organization in a situation characterized by high levels of uncertainty that impact hiring decisions, among other things. Despite these limitations in terms of access to funding, MC's budget shows rapid growth that speaks to the perceived quality and relevance of its programming and mandate by Canadian arts funders and other partners. Between 2019 – 2020 and 2022 – 2023, its budget increased by 1425%.[vi] What MC is known for in the Canadian arts sector is most particularly its participatory governance model, which was officiated in 2019. The next section presents and discusses that model in more details.

MC's participatory governance model

In 2019, MC evolved into a relatively horizontal structure made of five Working Groups, currently composed of four to seven volunteers who live and work across Canada.[vii] The Working Groups focus on the following strategic activities: research; communications; operations; engagement; and network. This structure was envisioned with the hope that the Working Groups would eventually be able to self-organize as much as possible within the limits of their established mandates and respective terms of reference. Members can sit on the Operations Group for a two-year term, which can only be renewed once. In the other Working Groups, there is currently no limit in terms of tenure. Every Working Group has the power

to pass motions as it pertains to the mandate, role, and responsibilities established in their terms of reference. All members sitting on MC's governance structure have voting privileges they can use during MC's annual general meeting. In each group, one or two "group co-conduits" are additionally responsible for meeting annually with the other groups' co-conduits to share their work. As stated in MC's *Policy and Procedure Handbook*:

> The principles which have guided Mass Culture's work from its inception are deeply rooted in the governance model that has emerged to carry the work of the organization forward. As Mass Culture evolves into its optimal shape and size it is essential to its founders (the governing body of 2019) that the integrity of its Guiding Principles exist and thrive throughout all of its work. To ensure this, Mass Culture's governance must always reflect these principles by treating each individual engaged in Mass Culture as a lead contributor. Mass Culture recognizes that organizations require strong leadership to inform direction. However, leadership roles pertain neither to seniority nor legacy, but rather to the passion, strengths and commitment of individuals. (Mass Culture, 2020)

MC's organizational mandate is articulated through the following guiding principles: mutual respect; access; decent work; reconciliation and relationship development; relations; stability; and integrity. Data shows that these guiding principles allow members sitting on MC's governance structure to feel as though they are part of a value-based organization, which is a driving motivational factor in volunteering for the network. Bearing this in mind, MC's governance structure raises questions regarding the capacity of people from various socio-professional backgrounds to commit to taking part in its governance structure and exercise leadership. Its volunteer model, which represents the norm in terms of governance across Canadian cultural non-profits, can generate structural obstacles to the activation of several guiding principles, including decent work, access, stability, and relations. This is even more the case as MC has been developing, in the past few months, a more resource-intensive model of community engagement, wherein Working Group members will be assigned, based on their preferences, to one of MC's projects, and expected to contribute directly to its design, implementation, and evaluation. Unsurprisingly, MC's governance model attracts a specific type of volunteer characterized by high levels of cultural, social, and economic capital, and high administrative literacy. Although MC does not offer honorariums or other forms of financial compensation to its volunteers, our data also shows that professional opportunities within the network will be offered to some of them to compensate their time and effort. Although participation varies across Working Groups, which are autonomous in the setting of meeting frequency and agenda, MC is committed to experimenting with different approaches to ensure that the Working Group members can participate in strategic decision-making and evaluation activities as much as it is possible for them to do so.

MC's overall organizational structure was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. The arrival of the novel coronavirus sparked a shift in sectoral priorities and moved MC to adjust its in-person approach to a digital one. At the time, MC had grown into a larger network with more resources, including a full-time, permanent employee, and so Working Group members decided that MC needed its own paid leadership. The person who was hired for a three-year contract as the Director of Organizational Development was one of MC's co-founders. This choice was made considering, amongst other things,

their knowledge, history, care, and energy for MC as an emerging organization. Our interviews show that MC tends to be conflated with its Director, which reveals the high degree of implication and influence of the Director in the development and shaping of MC's strategic orientation and aesthetics. Our data also shows that for the type of fluid organization that MC is, specific leadership skills are perceived as being crucial to successfully lead, host, and coordinate the type of projects that MC does. These include a strong capacity to identify potential opportunities for partnerships across a dynamic ecosystem; engaging in active listening with all stakeholders; strong persuasion skills when it comes to convincing partners to take a leap in the dark and support experimental projects; balancing organizational flexibility with intentionality; being committed to MC's values; hiring competent employees, and so on (Participant #4; Participant #5; Participant #6). During the interviews I conducted, the imminent end of MC's Director's contract in December 2023 generated mixed feelings and raised questions as to how the network would evolve or even survive after their departure (Participant #4; Participant #6). The data indicates that MC's Operations Group, in collaboration with the staff, were brainstorming different ways to continue involving the Director in another role after the end of their contract to ease the network's transition to a new steering leadership.

From 2015 to 2023, one can also note how MC's initiatives developed into larger, longer, and more complex participatory projects involving a wide range of social partners. Its programming shows a multiplication of long-term, carefully planned initiatives, a trend that has translated into the hiring and training of new project-based, contract employees in addition to the two permanent full-time employees. To successfully deliver its current programming with such limited full-time permanent human resources, the network must ground its work within community as much as possible. This way, other social actors involved in its governance structure contribute and carry out MC's mandate in their own milieux.

MC's community-based approach to research

Building on community-engaged strategies and community consultation processes, MC articulated its 2021 – 2023 research agenda along three interrelated objectives: (a) framing arts impact by conveying the value of the arts in society; (b) establishing a community of practice for arts research; and (c) encouraging and supporting research about the arts sector. These substantive goals, grounded in a community-based approach, are reflective of a commitment to cultural democracy. At MC, the operationalization of these goals is activated through three main orientations: (1) a reliance on partnerships and a strong valuation of relationships, (2) a focus on experimentation and experiential learning, and (3) an explicit commitment towards knowledge mobilization and sectoral empowerment.

(i) Relationship-building and partnerships

For MC to lead, co-facilitate, produce, or disseminate research in the arts sector, it must collaborate with partners who have the necessary research expertise, embodied knowledge, lived experience, skills, and financial resources. Although MC focuses its programming mostly on research and training activities, it has itself limited internal research capacity. Its staff is composed of experienced arts professionals who are not trained as researchers, and it is unclear if, how, and how frequently members of the Research Group are involved in the different phases of MC's project. What our data shows is that those employed

by partner institutions working with the network on specific initiatives tend to be more involved than others in specific projects.

Partnerships can take various forms, require varying degrees of participation from those involved, and each partnership has its own unique duration and range of objectives to achieve. A significant time commitment is required to build relationships and truly understand partners' needs. On many occasions and in different contexts throughout this research project, participants in MC's programming used adrienne maree brown's famous quote, "moving at the speed of trust" (2017), to illustrate this dynamic. At MC, partnerships are subject to an organizational protocol involving the application of a "decision checklist" featured in its *Policy and Procedure Handbook* by the Network Group (Mass Culture, 2020: 10). This checklist is articulated on three main criteria: the viability of the activity or partnership, based on its alignment with MC's core values and purpose; its feasibility, based on the partner's capacity to respect MC's limitations, resources, and operating constraints; and its desirability, based on the partnership's capacity to foster sectoral participation and co-creation processes. Then, in accordance with the nature of the partnership, the request will be forwarded to the most relevant Working Group(s) to address its specificities. While this process is meant to build consensus and ensure a collective endorsement of strategic decisions, it is also a time and energy-consuming process that may not be ideal for structures relying on volunteer labour. In certain situations, due to a lack of capacity or time, MC's staff must accept or reject a partnership without consulting with the Working Groups. Our data shows that consistent activation of intentional policies and procedures can be trickier in practice, particularly for small organizations that often carry out more than they have the internal capacity to. Indeed, an informal conversation with a Network Group member revealed that they had never seen or used the decision checklist after a year of sitting on MC's governance structure.

(ii) Experimentation and experiential learning

A second feature of MC's approach to research is that it is mostly experimental, which has an impact on relationship-building and partnerships. Experiential learning and processes are valued as much as end results, as are typical of community-based participatory research designs. Within such an open-ended approach, securing research partnerships with large, well-established institutions such as arts funders can be a challenge. For MC, being transparent about the fact that no one knows what will come out of participating in their research activities is a way to activate its guiding principle of integrity. MC's experimental approach to knowledge production and dissemination often entails the mobilization of community-engaged methods such as creative writing, material practice, embodied practice, gamifying, speculation, etc. According to a research participant, community-engaged methods always entail a great deal of uncertainty in terms of reaching preestablished goals (Participant #5). For this participant, their capacity to bring community members to unknown territories and imaginaries is also why these processes are so rewarding.

For another research participant, confronted with today's political, social, economic and climate crises, community engagement must be part of the world-making practices of tomorrow. This is because community-engaged methods call for reimagining and rebuilding the world based on our lived experiences in a more socially just way.

> If we're talking about building the post-COVID world in whatever format, I just don't see
> how that can happen in a not-community-engaged way. It feels obvious to do that work in
> a community-engaged way because we're trying to build something based on our lived
> experiences, and our lived experience through the pandemic is not established in the
> literature yet. We have to go to the people for those answers. I think if we're trying to build,
> if we're talking about a just transition or, you know, any kind of justice post-pandemic, I
> think community-engaged research is pretty essential. If we're not going to center the
> voices of communities while we're trying to rebuild those communities, that just doesn't
> really make sense to me. (Participant #2)

MC's approach to research gives community members an opportunity to come together, share lived experiences, and identify commonalities and potential avenues for social change. Since its creation, MC has become somewhat of a leader in terms of designing, implementing, and evaluating community-engaged or participatory projects. The driving force behind all partnership decisions at MC is that they have to result in concrete benefits for its community. This explains why the network is committed to sharing back all of its learnings with its community.

(iii) Knowledge mobilization and sectoral empowerment

MC's community-engaged approach is meant to empower its community members through knowledge mobilization and the production of useful and free resources that are shared widely across the sector. This educational aspect of MC's participatory programming is particularly obvious when it comes to helping to develop policy-making skills across the sector. MC engages "indirectly" with advocacy by offering training opportunities to its members (Participant #4; Participant #5). For example, the network is currently hosting a learning stream centred on arts advocacy and activism in the context of its T.R.A.I.N. program. During the January 2023 *ASO Convergence Conference*, the network also hosted a participatory workshop that brought representatives from Canadian arts services organizations to engage in the co-production of a joint budget brief, insisting on its value from a cultural policy and ground-level practice perspective.

As the network gained traction, MC finds itself in a position where it must decline partnership proposals as it does not have the capacity to undertake them all. Members sitting on MC's governance structure are aware that this new positioning within the arts sector also comes with certain risks. Such a risk would be, for instance, to become trapped in a logic where participatory projects are continuously developed and justified based solely on their participatory nature, without giving sufficient consideration to institutionalizing these efforts into formal arrangements that effectively serve the interests of MC's community members. Here, the national scope of MC's projects may act as an obstacle to the production of resources and policy solutions that could satisfy its heterogenous community. For instance, a recurring comment made by several participants during informal conversations at the January 2023 *ASO Convergence Conference* was that the conference's content, format, number of attendees, and facilitation approaches did not always allow for a deep reflection on structural issues or for the co-design of innovative policy solutions. For the small organization that MC is, being able to meet this set of expectations in the context of a national event attended by over 100 representatives of arts service

organizations each serving their own constituencies and communities appears like a considerable challenge.

Concluding remarks

This article looked at MC's emergence as a networked organization drawing on participatory governance and community-engaged research processes. It also introduced and critically reflected on key dimensions of its approach to research: its emphasis on relationship-building and partnerships; its focus on experimentation and experiential learning; and its commitment towards knowledge mobilization and sectoral empowerment. MC's experience with testing new ways of working and being can offer contributions to the field of arts management and cultural policy. In the context where MC's organizational structure and approach to research were always meant to be fluid and evolve over time, a few features deserve attention:

- MC's model of community engagement and cross-sectoral participation is currently articulated on fostering participation from people working in, or—in the case of academics— studying the Canadian arts sector. An interesting avenue of development for MC's projects would be to include people with lived experiences of other sectoral realities who might help stir up new ideas and co-design policy solutions better equipped to deal with complex systems and interdependencies[1].
- While MC's project-based funding encourages an event-based participation model, it partially balances this impermanence with its participatory governance structure, where members are elected for a certain duration at the annual general meeting. A closer examination of motivational dynamics, attraction and retention processes, and outreach strategies would be helpful to better understand the factors facilitating or impeding participation across the public. This exercise could be led to include people who have never participated in MC's governance structure, which would be relevant considering that MC's participatory governance is designed and structured in ways that reproduce a certain elitism. This is important for MC to understand as it seeks to activate guiding principles of access, mutual respect, reconciliation, and relationship development with historically marginalized communities, such as Indigenous communities.
- For participation to fully serve democratic ideals, there must be more attention brought to institutionalization processes and their capacity to effectively provide the necessary conditions for participation to flourish and benefit all social actors. The case of MC shows that despite the production of carefully crafted policies and procedures meant to regulate participatory processes, institutional precarity continues to act as a counterforce to organizational goals. This is another reason to look at current funding programs for cultural non-profits in Canada and examine the conditions in which they might impede or contribute to social change.

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[1] This was discussed by participants during the session on transformative change I co-facilitated with Carla Stephenson during the January 2023 ASO Con*vergence Conference*.

- Considering that the next few months will be marked by strategic decisions surrounding the departure of its Director of Organizational Development, considerable attention should be brought to the fact that project-based organizational structures and participatory structures can fuel unhealthy workloads and even burn out amongst its staff.

As the Canadian arts sector continues to explore avenues for social and transformative change and post-pandemic regeneration, there is a need for empirical research on issues such as collaboration dynamics within specific contexts, co- or distributed leadership models, community-engaged processes, participatory governance structures, and other related topics. Furthermore, research should examine the structural conditions necessary for these organizational experimentations to generate transformative change.

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[i] The neoliberalization of cultural policy can be described as a process grounded in, and reproduced by, "an ideological approach to the state's role in economy and society characterized by small government, reliance on market forces to address policy issues and administer government programs, monetarist fiscal policies, debt and deficit reduction, and individualism" (Gattinger & St-Pierre, 2010).

[ii] This group included Robin Sokoloski, MC's current Director of Organizational Development, Kristian Clarke, Katherine Cornell, Tara Mazurk, and Clayton Windatt.

[iii] According to Beauregard (2021), it hosted 114 public consultations across Canada between 1949 and 1951 in which approximately 1200 witnesses participated. Its final report, also known as the Massey Report, shaped and continues to shape Canada's cultural policy in important ways. The report produced 146 recommendations based on these consultations, in addition to 462 formal submissions and several hundreds of letters from Canadian citizens.

[iv] For more information, see: https://criticaldigitalmethods.ca/artifex/

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[v] As stated in its *Policy and Procedure Handbook* (Mass Culture, 2020) MC uses the terms community and network interchangeably, to refer to "individuals who have attended [their] gatherings, follow MC on social media, have signed up for MC's newsletter, or are otherwise engaged with MC". At the time of writing this article, its community was estimated by its staff to be comprised of approximately 1500 members.

[vi] Numbers provided by MC in February 2023.

[vii] According to MC's website, there are currently 29 volunteers participating in its Working Groups. Geographical representation is a central selection criterion for MC's governance structure. From them, 13 are based or work in Ontario, 5 in the Prairies, 4 in Quebec, 2 in the Maritimes, 4 in the West, and 1 in the North of Canada.