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Streaming Into the Unknown

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Article abstract

David Dacks, Executive Director of the Music Gallery in Toronto, discusses the organization's response to COVID-19.

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Streaming into the Unknown

David Dacks

Life for the Music Gallery changed in March 2020—as it did for everyone. Ever since, we’ve been taking stock of our organization, our community, and even the very notion of what art we should be presenting.

In this time of crisis, the Music Gallery’s institutional privilege is never far from my mind. We’ve received federal funding since our founding in 1976 and we’ve parlayed early support from those funding-friendly times into a wide range of government support that has given us stability over the years. We are mindful that newer arts organizations face far more challenges when it comes to accessing funding for operations simply because they’re younger.

The flip side of institutional privilege is institutional responsibility to circulate our access to resources to artists and to do so equitably. In March, when there was maximum uncertainty about the nature of the virus and the effect of public health measures on musicians’ livelihood, we knew our initial moves had to be quick and community oriented. To start, we cancelled the remainder of our season and then paid out all artists, tech, and front of house staff associated with those shows. We extended refunds to all ticket holders and partners staging shows with us. In the weeks before the federal government’s CERB program launched, and further still before it was tweaked to admit applications by freelancers, our priorities were to pay artists—especially local artists—as soon as possible.

We knew right away that all arts organizations would be pivoting to livestreaming and, due to our background in contemporary music of all forms, this was in some ways a liberating realization. Our artistic community has long explored telematic, site specific, and other types of conceptual programming, so this new reality was a challenge with which we had some experience. Our initial move was to partner with the Canadian Music Centre to commission Xuan Ye’s “S.Q.U.I.R.R.E.L.S,” a generative, instructional score hosted on their website featuring GIFs of squirrels, dogs, and the occasional human scrolling throughout the screen, gradually becoming more intense. We selected six performers of diverse musical backgrounds to respond to the score and programmed one per week. Concurrently, we ran a series of interviews with community elders/veterans because of the grim evidence in March that older folks were at a higher risk to contract the disease. Echoing our long-running History Series, we endeavoured to record their stories. Great care was taken to match interviewers and subjects, such as the father/daughter combo of Trichy and Suba Sankaran and new-gen podcasters Kritty Uranowski and Jesse Locke speaking with Anne Bourne.

Throughout this initial programming activity, we took care to spread work around in such a way that if one of the three people involved in coordinating the programming were to fall ill, the others would step in. This marked a break from the usual hierarchy of the Artistic Director as clear leader. We also checked in on all staff constantly to inquire about mental health, specific needs, and to pass along news. Likewise, dealing with artists became more sensitive than usual as many creative folks were deeply upset and struggling to cope with the effects of the pandemic on their lives and livelihoods. Some found themselves unable to create while others were more inspired than ever. In every case, we made sure to communicate that if life circumstances forced them to cancel their commitments with us, to please let us know and we would understand.

During the summer, when the Music Gallery normally would have wrapped up our season, we

chose instead to embark on a second round of programming. Again, we focused on distributing our good fortune. We drew upon our video archives and live recordings in our Bandcamp archive to create watch parties in which the original participants in concerts and panel discussions reconvened for a live Facebook chat. In these watch parties—scheduled to coincide with the popular “Bandcamp Days,” where the platform waived their fees on album revenue—participants relived their experiences and contributed new thoughts to still- and differently relevant themes such as “the future of creative music in Toronto.” As it turned out, we ended up paying significantly more artists than we would have had the season unfolded as planned.

Artistic direction has changed for the foreseeable future. We will most likely not be doing any conventional live concert programming in our 2020-21 season, which deepens the question of “what is programming” that arose at the beginning of the crisis. If the “new reality” centres on video production presented through social media, which typically falls to our marketing staff, what role do they play in the presentation of art now that they are effectively our tech staff? What do we hope to achieve with the resources we have, what additional resources do we need, and how do we evaluate success if event attendance and box office revenue are removed from the equation? Above all, how could art and marketing intersect to create original, meaningful art for and by our community?

Our upcoming 2020-21 season was largely planned out by last March, thanks to two artistic associates who worked alongside the Artistic Director during the 2019-20 season as part of a mentorship program. The Music Gallery has since decided to try to preserve much of that programming. Certain activities would be impossible or highly risky to program, including presenting foreign artists in Canada and presenting group activities in person. Beyond that, after monitoring other organizations’ programming efforts, we discovered we didn’t need to program a typical 2-set concert; rather, one set per event date could be enough. We shouldn’t feel obligated to present on weekends or even evenings. We don’t even have to present concerts; instead, we could choose to program web-based activities, crowd-sourced creative undertakings, or audiovisual art—the more creative, the better. These discoveries opened up new conversations with previously contracted artists beyond the usual topics of set length, travel arrangements, and tech requirements.

Our board agreed to take the radical step of projecting zero box office revenue for 2020-21, which meant marketing activities are not focused on driving ticket sales but engaging, and growing, online community. Offline fundamentals remain: to ensure our activities look and feel like Toronto in all its diversity, however the term is defined, and to make sure decision makers in our organization reflect this priority as well. Without the barriers of ticket prices, having to travel to a venue, and the insularity of a “scene,” many systemic barriers of accessing experimental music presentation could be broken down, enabling a wider audience. Moreover, producing videos and working with video artists requires building new communities of folks better acquainted with new media, which presents the opportunity to work with a greater number of equity-seeking individuals with these skills than would have been possible before.

These activities merely represent an emerging framework to work with artists but don’t prescribe any artistic priorities. We, as always, want to create winning conditions for artists to create amazing art. There is even more at stake now, as we must come to grips with the social issues stoked by the pandemic: poverty, (further) racial injustice, homelessness, and much more. We must continually seek out new artists who paint a bigger picture of the world and we need to adjust our organization accordingly. I don’t need to have all the answers, but I do need to be flexible and learn from like-minded individuals and organizations.

Nobody knows where this crisis will lead and how long it will last. As we move into the next phase of the pandemic, however, we have a clear idea of what guides us and a clear direction to respond to our community as the situation evolves.