

TAKE 1

There has been much talk and thinking this year on the subject of creating some sort of centralized body to promote and organize community arts initiatives in Toronto more effectively. Groups of artists gathered to participate in Seven Rivers, an artist focused model that was inspired by Dan Yashinsky and Robin Pacific. UrbanArts Executive Director Lilita Tannis facilitated the first visioning meeting. Similarly, TCAA (Toronto Community Arts Alliance) representing community arts councils in Toronto has been re-evaluating and reworking itself to become a viable advocate for community arts in our city. In response to some of this debate and dialogue, Ruth Howard, a veteran Toronto artist wrote the following letters in August and December of 2004.

Letters from a Middle-Aged Artist

August 2004

Dear Colleagues,

When I first heard of the idea of creating a new organizational entity of some sort [Seven Rivers], I understood that it had to do with creating more significant support, continuity and stability for artists so that we could do our work better. The initiative was to make a bigger impact in the city (with all the implied and requisite outreach, "animation", communications, networking, partnering etc.). This is exciting, because it cuts to the core of why it is so hard now to do this work, and why the whole might be seen as "less than the sum of the parts". (It's struggle enough to keep a few of the parts alive!).

A desired big vision would, before anything else, have to be about giving artists more financial stability. It is such a sad situation that more or less the only way for an artist to make a steady income in our society is to become an administrator. And I hate to perpetuate that. One of the things that happens partnering with social service agencies is that eventually one begins to resent the fact that "they" have salaries and get paid to come to meetings, to work over-time and "we" don't. I have seen more than one community arts project where the social services partners have created salaried positions for "project coordinators" while the lead artists had to piece together their own fees as best they could. Unless we are on an equal footing

in terms of status and job security, it isn't ever entirely accurate to talk about "partnerships".

I have afforded to do what I do and still raise three children and live in Toronto with a middle-classish lifestyle only because I have a partner with a salaried job and other family support systems. Even though I may be perceived as successful and suddenly a "senior" artist, it is only in the past couple of years that by writing grants practically non-stop, I have been able to piece together a precarious annual income for myself of over \$25000, as well as support my company, projects and productions. And I try to turn a blind eye to all the hidden expenses that I cover out of my own pocket. I frequently wonder how long I will have the energy to keep it all going in this way. While I'm profoundly appreciative of my good fortune as the world and the *biz* goes, and of all the support and encouragement I have received, it's important to be straightforward about such things. I don't like to mislead young artists, and artists arrived from other lands, to think that I am an encouraging example of a viable artistic career or that such a thing exists. If "senior" (or middle-aged) community-engaged artists can barely afford to do it, then what's the point of setting up any sort of ideal model?

We need to be attentive that any proposed scheme addresses this situation. We need to be careful that the relatively secure job(s) that might result would not only be for coordination and administration positions (whether or not these were filled by artists in search of a well-paying job). If what is being proposed is to work with high-needs urban communities to create infrastructure so that community arts can happen, an exemplary goal, we need to ask whether we are creating another long-term project or arts organization [Seven Rivers], albeit ambitious and wide-reaching, rather than rethinking the status quo under which we operate.

At one of our meetings it was claimed that it is impossible for the partner agencies to develop infrastructure, meaningful projects etc. within a situation of small, unstable grants. True enough, but we, as artists, all have to do that, or attempt to. Why is it acceptable for us? (Well, I know we all agree that it isn't...). I've heard that somewhere (Regina? Australia?) artists can get a decent two-year salary for a community arts residency. I feel so strongly that there is something wrong with the current position

of artists (not just community artists), that to work towards any sort of central arts body without that being in the forefront would amount to an abandonment of what is most crucial.

I think a really radical thing to do would be to envisage artists having a different place within the whole structure. Even if one could never provide full-time jobs for all community-engaged artists, establishing and insisting on the concept would be an important shift.

What about a situation where every neighbourhood centre has an "artistic director" (as does Oxford House in London, U.K.)? Perhaps a two or three year term with a salary, a decent budget and a physical facility? What about a funded mentoring program where senior artists/ companies as well as those being mentored received funds for a mentoring relationship? What about bringing more money into already existing funding programs, so that funding ceilings can be raised to reflect the real needs of the work and more artists can get funded? What about multi-year funding for established companies and projects? What about gathering more resources for what already exists: for example, allowing existing community arts centres to afford adequate, well-qualified, full-time administrative support; allowing artistic directors a decent rate of pay so that they don't have to exhaust themselves writing grants and taking on other contracts; allowing innovative companies the resources to document and promote their work and to offer training opportunities; enabling artists who have been working for decades in Toronto communities to have permanent premises other than unheated park sheds or their own living rooms; and allowing the treatment of our truly "senior" artists to be a shining example of how our city values art that is reaching out to include all of its citizens. Why not start with looking at what we've got and what is already being achieved with inadequate means, and seeing how these things can be supported so that they can grow so that new layers and connections can emerge?

Not to say that there shouldn't be overarching organizations and planning; but - just like the social services organizations - with some stability of funding we could all make more far-reaching plans, communication channels etc. Without that, we continue to scrape and scramble for inadequate scraps and do the best we can, and larger schemes can actually get in the way.

I think it is a mistake to assume there are not other artists who might be drawn to community arts work who are capable, talented, subtle and visionary. Such people must be out there from all sorts of backgrounds, needing to be nurtured and encouraged; and if not then the whole thing will be doomed anyway. Overall I think it's important to err on the side of trusting and supporting the artists, and that this will best serve Toronto communities and the glory of the city as a whole.

Maybe this is just so obvious that no one else is bothering to say it. But, at the risk of being tedious, I can't help pointing out what I feel is so important, since we are talking about big visions of how we would like things to be.

Dec. 2004

Well, reading this over four months later, I would still say the same things more or less. In the meantime I have paid a visit to Saskatchewan and can vouch for the existence of a provincial program that pays artists a two-year half-time salary of \$25000 per year to work in communities (a scheme that has been in place for over 20 years: which isn't perfect, and is still being tweaked and explored, but still...). My conviction has only grown that the important overall issues to address if we are congregating to improve the state of community-engaged arts in our city, are: training and mentorship; documentation and promotion; and the financial situation of artists. Of course we can also talk about aesthetics and whether and why "community arts" needs to be separated from the overall concept of "art". But that's another discussion!

In attempting to organize ourselves there also seems to be a dangerous potential for divisiveness - not surprisingly since we're dealing with a collection of independent-minded, opinionated people, including myself! The answer must be to come together around some basic matters about which we can agree, and leave debate about methodologies for elsewhere. Through talking to lots of different and smart people, seeing lots of varied and exciting work, and reflecting on the fact that people do sometimes seem to listen and startling changes do sometimes occur, I'm feeling more hopeful now than I did in August that this might be possible and worthwhile.

by Ruth Howard