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Introduction to special issue Return to Impact: A Process of Imagining Introduction au numéro spécial Retour à l'impact : un processus d'imagination

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Introduction to special issue

Return to Impact: A Process of Imagining

In the first of this double issue, we grounded the collection in Mass Culture's *Research in Residence: Arts' Civic Impact* (RinR) project. Aimed at creating a suite of impact measurement frameworks for arts organizations to assess where and how their work has impact, the SSHRC- and Mitacs-funded project embedded four individual graduate student researchers and one team of two graduate students—all from different post-secondary institutions—in arts organizations across the country. Also supported by a group of arts funders comprising an advisory, this first-of-its-kind initiative has had impressive impacts of its own in both the academic and culture sector spheres. Since publishing our first collection of articles, the landscape has changed. RinR's graduate student researchers have all moved on in some way, be it finishing a master's degree and starting a doctorate, finishing a doctorate and moving into a post-doctoral fellowship, finishing graduate school and working within an academic institution, and even continuing with their studies while starting a family. Other people involved in RinR have likewise changed jobs or even left the arts sector or academia altogether. Assembling this second issue has afforded us, the co-editors, some very welcome reflection on the project, the relationships we built through it, and how it continues to shape both our individual careers and perspectives on the arts' civic impact.

Conversations currently swirling through the arts sector in Canada, in large part because of RinR along with other projects led by Mass Culture, are finally seeing some shift towards systemic change and resistance against prevailing understandings of impact. While in some instances we see a return to the old arguments for demonstrating the importance of the arts through economic framing (Ontario Arts Council, 2024; Chawla, 2024), there is a palpable openness to other narratives for making the impact argument. Eventually, perhaps, the sector, governments, and funders will arrive at the understanding that if the economic impact argument was all that was needed, we would be in a much better place than we are now. Nevertheless, the reality is that the arts and culture sector has not recovered from the pandemic. What we are seeing is that emergency support mechanisms that were put in place only kicked a much deeper and more systemic problem down the line that economic arguments for the arts are not fixing. The systems and ways of working that the sector relied on pre-2020 are no longer sufficient for sustaining a vibrant arts milieu. And yet, there is a remarkable lack of criticality in understanding why this is so.

With the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the waves of protest and calls for change rippling throughout societies across the world, Canada's arts sector had some very dark realities to face. An explosion of efforts and initiatives aimed at racial equity inundated the sector, and calls to "build back better" (Lederman, 2021) sought to capitalize on the sector-wide shut down and forced pause in activity to imagine a new world in which the arts are understood as central to humanity. Dance artist and writer Shannon Litzenberger (2022) put into words what many of us were speaking about behind the scenes, the need for

...disrupting a system that too often disregards its destructive impacts in the name of profit, progress, and growth ...acknowledging and holding ourselves accountable for our complicity with the damaging cultural norms that uphold this system... [and] working purposefully, in solidarity, toward reshaping ourselves and our society in ways that

prioritize care, creative possibility, equity, justice, well-being, interdependence, and reciprocity. (¶4)

And yet, as the pandemic officially ended and emergency relief supports evaporated, those of us working in the arts were inundated with statistics that showed the sector was not back to its pre-pandemic levels of ticket sales, productions, revenue generation, and other quantitative metrics. A new crisis emerged, with major arts institutions going into receivership (e.g., Artscape), shuttering operations and laying off staff (e.g., Hot Docs), and having long-standing corporate sponsors walk away (e.g., TIFF). And so a particular tension emerges from the calls for change and the aim for pre-pandemic numbers: if we really are committed to building back better, how can we have our sights set on pre-pandemic targets? Put differently, why would we (re)aim for quantity of products over quality of experience?

All of these issues occur within a much broader, global context that not only minimizes, even trivializes, the woes of the arts sector, but also underscores its necessity as a driver of Litzenberger's vision for a new world. Wars in Ukraine, Gaza, and Lebanon dominate news cycles, which do not even offer an accounting of other even longer wars in Sudan and Somalia or any number of other major conflicts around the globe. The world also witnessed the political turmoil over the 2024 US presidential election campaign and the implications for women's health, climate change, and US foreign policy. Canadians know that highly politicized viewpoints on any issue in the US do not stop at the border between our countries but rather bleed over and shape discourses and political activity here. And, across the country the inflation and affordability crises are having devastating impacts on the ability for people to even afford food. Feed Ontario, for instance, reports that as of September 2024 Ontario food banks have seen a 134% increase in visits from people in need compared to 2019-2020 (Feed Ontario, 2024). Certainly for some, turning our focus from the arts sector to these issues renders the concerns within the arts as hardly worth thinking about.

Yet, what we in the arts sector know very well, but have not yet been able to effectively get broader society to understand, is that the arts are vital for not only coping with major crises like war but central to making sense of the worlds in which we exist. It is through our creative capacity for documentation and critical reflection that artists wield the power to suture gaps in community, policy, and understanding cleaved by political discord. Not only do we create an archive of experiences from which we are faced with complex narratives of human existence that prompt discussion and urge empathy, we also show the world how to imagine new realities and think outside of what is known. It is this ability that is key to reimagining new, innovative solutions to issues like war, hunger, and bodily autonomy. This, here, is the civic impact of the arts: enabling imagination.

Three of the RinR researchers are featured in this second volume. Aaron Richmond's reflection on the creation of his framework, "Access in Counterpoint," describes some of the ways that conventional and historical conceptualizations of impact and measurement, including the original domain of health and wellbeing that he was brought into the project to study, are themselves part of the problem that needs to be challenged. Specifically in relation to blindness and dance, Richmond's contribution to this issue deeply engages critical theory and is an excellent example of ways that academic research—widely regarded in the cultural sector (and others) as completely divorced from the "real world"—can be applied and mobilized in tangible ways. Similarly, Shanice Bernicky's contribution is firmly situated within an academic framing, one that is unique in its application of management, feminist, and decolonial theory to

her examination of EDI (equity, diversity, and inclusion) in the arts. By recounting her path in developing her RinR framework, “Spiralling Outwardly for Equity in Public Arts,” her work exemplifies the maxim that “equity is a process.” Bernicky’s particular study demonstrates the limitations and contradictions of EDI as a bureaucratic imperative and reveals that we cannot “manage” our way into an equitable arts sector. And Sydney Pascal’s contemplation about activating Indigenous practices and methodologies point to the academy’s continued complicity in Canada’s ongoing settler-colonial project. Struggling to operate within systems that not only were born out of the sciences but also assume a particular way of “doing” research and particular dynamics between researcher and participant, for Pickering, the very notion of “ethics” as applied in a post-secondary institutional context is itself unethical and thereby antithetical to Indigenous worldviews.

The other contributions to this second volume serve two functions. First, they give more background to RinR, providing a historical perspective on the project’s emergence as well as perspectives on the project’s own impact. Second, they contribute to broader scholarly discourses about the very nature of research, especially in the arts and other creative practices. Jamie Gamble, RinR’s developmental evaluator, and his co-author Robin Nelson, also a co-editor of this double-issue, provide insights into two important areas of the RinR project. The pair’s work demonstrates how embedding a developmental evaluation approach into a project opens up possibilities for imagining how the arts sector could — and should — question what it understands evaluation to be. Their piece also illustrates how arts organizations, both large and small, can make steps toward embedding evaluative thinking within their day-to-day operations. The authors also underscore an important learning for the arts sector — research is experimental, and embracing uncertainty and being open to unspecific deliverables or even no deliverables at all is where creativity, discovery, and innovation lay. Mary-Elizabeth (ME) Luka and Robin Sokoloski, also co-editors of this double issue, offer a contribution that documents a roundtable discussion they led with members of RinR’s funder advisory, including co-editor Shawn Newman. Mapping the learnings and relationships from the advisory that emerged through participating in RinR, the discussion points to innovative in-roads that RinR has made both in terms of it being a cross-sectoral collaboration between the arts and academia and its governance structure. What is perhaps most interesting in this discussion are the moments where members of the advisory reveal their own learnings and where, even within their respective positions of power as both funders and individuals working within funding agencies, research in and on the arts still resists change.

We want to also take a moment to draw readers’ attention to the Research in Residence: Arts’ Civic Impact [companion podcast](#).ⁱ In it, you will hear directly from the researchers featured in this double issue: Sydney Pickering, Aaron Richmond, Emma Bugg, and Shanice Bernicky. You will also hear from some of the funders that supported the project and other key people, including Robin Sokoloski, Director of Programming and Research (formerly Director of Organizational Development) from Mass Culture and ME Luka from the University of Toronto Scarborough, who was RinR’s academic lead. The podcast was produced and is hosted by Shawn Newman, then Senior Manager, Research & Impact at Toronto Arts Council & Foundation, with production support from The Creative School at Toronto Metropolitan University.

This issue of *Culture and Local Governance* marks a rather definitive endpoint for RinR. And while the work continues, the three impact frameworks developed by Bugg, Bernicky, and Richmond are being tested by new organizations—this publication nonetheless signals a significant, bitter-sweet milestone.

We hope that these contributions to the impact measurement field, and the RinR frameworks, provide new ways of thinking through impact that move us, as a sector and as individuals, closer towards a new world in which it is not (only) numbers of ticket sales or jobs created that matter but instead the knowledge that the arts shape humanity and hold great potential for fostering empathy, connection, and understanding.

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ⁱ See: <https://open.spotify.com/show/22WYvLXTiSPY2Hm2MUzfhf?si=6570ad2150ba4c1b>

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