



Covid Visions

Agencies do the Covid Jig
Creative Saskatchewan, SaskCulture
via SaskLotteries, + SK Arts

by
STEVEN ROSS SMITH



Saskatchewan
Arts Alliance

Agencies do the Jig by **STEVEN ROSS SMITH**

Since the time that art in various disciplines became a profession — and grew to be an intellectual pursuit, an information exchange, an entertainment forum, a record of an era, a quality-of-life provider, and an economic engine — artists have often, but not always, been supported. Patrons, governments, agencies, clients, audiences, and consumers have contributed to artists' means and ability to carry on their art practices.

Arts and *culture* (that amorphous term) have grown with the evolution of disposable income, educational institutions, leisure time, and perhaps a hunger in the human soul for provocative or edifying views into existence, behaviour, and purpose, and into the physical, mental, and emotional ecology we inhabit or that inhabits us.

Saskatchewan was one of the first locales in Canada to recognize and respond to the value of supporting and fostering artists and an artistic environment for the benefit of its citizens. The Saskatchewan Arts Board (now SKArts), founded in 1948, is the oldest public arts funder in North America, predating the Canada Council for the Arts.

Depending on the frame of view, there are four 'primary' provincial funding agencies — perhaps we should call them *investment* agencies — for Saskatchewan artists and arts organizations: The Government of Saskatchewan, SKArts, SaskCulture, and Creative Saskatchewan. As with artists, these agencies too have been affected by two-plus years living with and responding to COVID and its variants.

In March 2020, when the pandemic forced sudden lockdowns, amidst chaos, each organization scrambled to find ways to continue to serve their clients, whose worlds had turned upside down. The agencies were working with disruptions we

now know well — the shift to remote work, reliance on digital communication, clients' inability to fulfill projects planned according to granted proposals, and all sorts of other factors.

Creative Saskatchewan is a Crown Agency whose mandate is to support creative entrepreneurs in commercializing their craft by way of programming and facilitating strategic connections. Erin Dean, CEO says, "In the height of COVID-19, we had to make fast changes and accommodations for unique, unprecedented issues... On a very human level, our team also had to be supportive and listen to applicants who were struggling, as their regular revenue sources became temporarily unavailable due to closures and travel restrictions."



Photo credit: Evgeni Tcherkasski, 2021.

The agency implemented flexible financial and reporting measures to leave funds in a clients' hands to weather cancellations of tours, performances, events, venues, and other project disturbances. As each situation was unique, the agency dealt with clients on a case-by-case basis and ensured that communication was as accessible as possible. Dean notes that "this was an unanticipated workload for our program officers, but we pulled it off...We genuinely believe in the success of our clients, and it was difficult to see them struggle."

At SKArts, Executive Director Michael Jones, whose agency directly supports artists and arts organizations says: "The first thing that we did was make sure that we were maintaining everything that we were doing. So that for any grants...that were based on what was going to be done at this specific time...we implemented policies to allow great flexibility...we didn't want to take away the resources. We also continued to pay out all our operational funding to organizations, recognizing that their work would have to be different...We did that so those organizations could stay as healthy as possible...We didn't get additional money from the government to address COVID issues [so] we weren't able to implement a lot of new funding programs or emergency funding programs. We worked to connect organizations and individuals with the programs that existed."

In COVID's first year, 2020, nearly all industries in the arts, entertainment, and recreation (AER) sector, generated less than half of their pre-pandemic operating revenue. As of September 2021, output levels in AER industries remained about one third below pre-pandemic levels. Though venues are opening again at the time of this writing in late May, and we're going out, purchasing tickets, attending free events, craving mind, eye, and ear food, there is little reason to think that the AER sector will shake off the lag quickly. There is considerable ground to regain. Art and culture engagers will have to overcome fears, uncertainties, and isolation habits, and economic setbacks manifested during COVID's past and ongoing infection.



Ness Creek Announcement: another event cancelled. 2020.



Entrance of the Regina Folk Festival, which reopened in 2022 after two years of cancellations due to Covid 19.

Nonetheless some spring events are filling to capacity.

A recent opinion piece in the *Globe & Mail* (“Uneven Recovery,” May 21, 2022) by Kieran Delamont proposes a new attitude toward the arts, suggesting that, while the focus now is on economic recovery, governments, agencies, and citizens need to see, with a fresh and deeper understanding, the value of the arts as essential and worthy of stronger investment. Delamont sees arts and culture — with, as possible, free access — as an antidote to the stresses, divisions, and exhaustions of the pandemic — a healing potion to enrich society and mend the social fabric, and even to stimulate the economy. Some countries already recognize this. Delamont reports that in France “the government distributed 300 euros to all young people to be spent on arts and culture.” Our federal government too seems to understand. Delamont writes: “In its 2021 budget, the federal government earmarked \$200 million over two years for a “Reopening Fund” to help support arts, culture,

heritage, and sport sectors: \$7 million for community music festivals, \$55 million for arts organizations, \$54 million for post-COVID celebration and commemorations.”

It is unclear how many of these dollars will flow to provincial governments and then to artists and arts organizations.

A spokesperson for the Government of Saskatchewan’s Department of Parks, Culture, and Sport recently replied: “Arts and culture play a significant role in the civic and economic life of Saskatchewan residents,” and notes that “the Government of Saskatchewan is committed to supporting Saskatchewan artists and cultural workers, which is why we provided the sector with financial support during the pandemic through the Saskatchewan Small Business Emergency Payment, Strong Recovery Adaptation Rebate, and the Saskatchewan Tourism Sector Support Program.”

And the government has increased the Feature Film and Television Production Grant Program to \$10 million and have made changes to the regulations and

guidelines to attract larger productions and create spin-offs in other parts of the arts sector.

At SaskCulture, CEO Dean Kush reports: “Thanks to strong revenues in lottery ticket sales, SaskCulture...has continued to offer flexible funding arrangements to organizations coping with cancellations and postponements... From the Bounce Back COVID survey we did in June 2021, we heard from community [organizations] that 67% saw decreased demand, 76% experienced decreased revenues, 84% had a decline in volunteers, and 38% were challenged with technology... There are concerns with many cultural organizations with the ability to draw volunteers, audiences, and participants back to cultural activity.”

The three agencies and the government ministry are collaborating on a re-engagement marketing campaign, which is underway. The flexibilities, efforts, and care that funding agencies have demonstrated is commendable, and essential.

StatsCan statistics I cited in the

previous Covid Visions story “The Pandemic Shadow” include these: Canadian artists earn 44% less than the average Canadian worker, and lack employment benefits, even though, in 2017 the direct economic impact of culture industries was \$58.9 billion in Canada, outpacing several sectors.

While the staff at the arts and culture agencies rallied heroically to flow support, artists teetered, and many fell. Artists will be the last to recover. Readjusted and flexible parameters to programs, grants, and other funding resources are helping. But increased investment and a return of strong audience attendance is necessary to ensure not just artists’ survival, but their vigour, health, and security. Agencies, presenters, and audiences would not exist were it not for artists’ foundational labours. Once again, for this writer and many other artists and arts enthusiasts, this raises the issue of guaranteed annual income, affordable access to health benefits, and other direct supports for professional artists — the same securities received by others working in the arts and culture sector.

Meanwhile, summer comes, and restrictions disappear. We gather. Joy mixes with uncertainty. The hard work proceeds. It seems that creativity cannot be stopped. Artists are compelled to make. Agencies are keen to invest. Preparations lead to presentation. Green rooms and galleries fill with chatter. And citizens hunger to gather and share the fruits of all these resources, labours, and energies. The hands of many are at work. A round of applause. The lights brighten. The long-delayed encore begins.



CREATIVE
SASKATCHEWAN

FUNDED BY



In partnership with



Steven Ross Smith, Banff Poet Laureate, 2019-21, loves music, practices yoga, is fascinated by moss, and has written the seven-book poetic series *fluttersong*. His arts journalism specializes in literary and visual arts. He recently published two chapbooks with Jackpine Press. His newest book—his fourteenth, and his third book of fiction—is *Glimmer: Short Fictions*, from Radiant Press. He writes in Victoria, BC.