

Understanding the Arts Ecology of Saskatchewan

A Research Project Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Saskatchewan Arts Alliance, the Saskatchewan Arts Board, SaskCulture and the University of Regina



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Introduction to Goals

The goal of this research project is to better understand how the shifting arts ecology of Saskatchewan is functioning at the grass-roots level. Although sometimes simply a nebulous synonym for "arts sector" (Centre for Innovation), the term "arts ecology" is used increasingly to imply that artists create within an interactive, symbiotic system of relationships among themselves and with their larger environment (Burgess). But what do we know about the way artists interact among themselves and with society, what connections are important to their art-making, what networks do they form or are they a part of and how would we know if any of that is changing? Effective support for artists and arts organizations and strong programs and policy-making require such information, but the scope and complexity of a research project to address these questions are beyond the capacity of any of the arts organizations to manage individually. However, SPAR's research partnership with its multi-disciplinary team of university-based researchers and SSHRC funding has made it possible to undertake such a study and provide policy-makers and the community with the knowledge they need for evidencebased decision making. At the same time it is helping to build longer term reciprocal relationships between researchers and arts leaders to facilitate co-creation of further knowledge and related methodology.

In a 2010 study for the Arts Alliance, Marnie Badham articulated the motivation for this partnership and research project: "What is truly lacking is ... a coordinated effort from arts leaders, policy makers, and the private sector to develop a framework that is informed by research expertise from many disciplines including the arts, but also public policy, economics and sociology. This approach will also help us collect better data, both qualitative and quantitative, about the arts and their relationship to our lives and our environment. Over time, this would not only tell us more about the arts, but about how the public feels about the arts, and will help to inform better policy decisions" (p. 19). Much cultural information has been produced by the provincial government and our partners, but much of it has not been available outside the organizations which produced it. This is not a problem peculiar to the arts or Saskatchewan (Badham, p. 8), but this partnership can now facilitate the assimilation of a multidirectional, cross-sector flow of knowledge and create a common base of information accessible to all.

Literature Review and Significant Research Questions

What is the nature of professional connections and networks forged by artists among themselves and with their community (broadly defined) and are these connections contributing to a healthy and sustainable arts ecology and the development of society? Answers to this central research question cannot come from theory or generalized observations. They require a specific place-based study grounded in the broad and unique arts ecology of Saskatchewan (Badham, p.19), but the importance of this study extends beyond the local and particular to address questions of international scope regarding the contributions of artists to our cultural, social and economic well-being. Too few studies of the kind we propose are being done, and our grass-roots approach is intended to produce valuable data and scholarly insights by creating a testing ground for fundamental assumptions that underpin assertions composing an influential and hotly contested cluster of concepts and theories such as arts ecology, creative classes, creative clusters, creative cities, creative economies and creative ecologies.

Although a subject for study since 1979 (Hope), "arts ecology" remains an emerging field of study fraught with conflicting definitions, differences of perception as to its major components and significant gaps between theory and evidence on how it actually functions. Mark Robinson notes that the term "arts ecology' has often been ill defined, if indeed a definition of any sort has been attempted," and little attention has been paid to "what the components of an arts ecology are, and how they might interrelate" (pp. 23-4). Writing in the context of financial crisis, Robinson is attracted to ecological thinking because of the emphasis on adaptation and "resilience in ecological and social systems" (p. 5) in the face of change. A US study comparing Philadelphia's arts ecology to that of 11 other cities defines the arts ecology as consisting of arts infrastructure, their support structures and the community contexts in which they operate" (McCarthy, p. xiv). This differs considerably from Robinson's definition depicted as a series of concentric circles situating the artist, "creativity," or "what artists are doing, how they are innovating and evolving ... at the heart of the arts ecology". The circles radiate out to the economy, "locality", and society at the edge of the ecology, but he argues that the connections between the various levels of the system work both ways, so that "what happens in a town or city ... impacts on the arts sector. What happens in the arts or in an arts venue changes the city" (p. 25). In fact, he relates the relative health of the ecology, its capacity to maintain creativity in the face of change, directly to "connectivity" and "networks of relationships enabling adaptive behaviour and resilience" (p. 26).

Robinson's observations highlight the difficulty with trying to develop simplified diagrams or layered structures to depict an "arts ecology". Systems devised through social network analysis and complexity theory have more potential for depicting the various components of such an ecosystem. Nodes in an arts network include not only artists, arts venues or organizations or a generalized "economy" but specific spaces, places and other types of infrastructure, institutions and businesses etc that are not necessarily automatically associated with the arts. The perception of such a network is also very different if you assume an external perspective like a traffic helicopter rather than the internal perspective of an artist (Kadushin p. 4). Although ultimately we may be able to construct a partial 'helicopter' perspective, we will first explore the complexity of the arts ecology from the inside out through the eyes of both individual artists and members of the general public.

An Arts Council England study focuses on the arts ecology as one component of an even more complex ecology, the "creative economy"--a concept that has had much influence among policy makers around the world thanks to theorists like John Howkins and Richard Florida who popularized concepts such as "creative class" and "creative cities". The study differentiates between an arts ecology "driven by intrinsic arts and cultural activities; expressive of a social relationship between producers and audiences; strongly linked to public investment and notfor-profit activities," and a "creative economy ... driven as much by commercial as artistic and cultural factors; expressive of an economic and social transaction between producers and markets; operating in a mixed economy of different types of private investment, alongside public investment". Composed of a broad set of industries, even scientific research and development according to some researchers, the "creative economy" thrives in a climate of social inclusion and "diversity" where new electronic media enable "the growing blending and convergence of the arts ecology and creative economy" (Fleming, pp. 6-7). Such concepts have been seized upon enthusiastically by cultural policy makers, municipal planners, businesses and artists, and their application has led to whole movements formalized in the form of the Creative Cities Networks run by UNESCO and the Creative City Network of Canada to which four Saskatchewan cities belong.

Given Saskatchewan's thriving provincial economy and the resulting population boom including both new artists and a substantial influx of immigrants primarily from Asia and Africa (Statistics Canada, The Canadian Population in 2011, Saskatchewan Population Report; Bureau of Statistics; Saskatchewan, Gov. Fact Sheet; Sandals; Citizenship and Immigration Canada), obvious questions arise as to whether local artists are connected with and/or benefitting from a "creative economy". With at least one statistical study suggesting an exceptionally strong "creative economy" in the province (Spencer, p. 110), our study of artist networks could be well positioned to respond to Canadian and international calls for "the appropriate measurement and development of a fuller insight into the stratification and employment/activity patterns of creative workers in the new economy" (Gollmitzer, pp 18, 20). Yet the implication of direct economic benefits and the application of these theories in Saskatchewan, as well as in many other regions of the country, necessitate a questioning approach. In a province with still only two cities having a population over 100,000, limited racial and ethnic diversity in comparison with many other Canadian urban centres despite recent immigration, and groups of rural artists who still do not have access to high speed internet service, theories drawn from a movement inspired by Europe's centres of urban agglomeration and predicated by such things as diversity and new technology, require adaptation in the spirit of Clifford Geertz' "local knowledge". As has been demonstrated by scholars and practitioners like the Small Cities Community-University Research Alliance, the cultural implications behind creative cities concepts can be applied to small cities as cultural hubs (Garrett-Petts; Duxbury; Rodning Bash; Maranda; Dunphy; Rogers; Hill Strategies). Given what we know of small Saskatchewan villages and towns (e.g., Tagaske, Meacham, East End and Corman Park) sought out by artists who in some cases compose over a third of the business community, creative clusters situated in big cities or small towns may also serve as catalysts for the rejuvenation of communities, but what is the role of artists in them and how do cultural policies and plans vs the artists themselves contribute to the development of creative spaces, clusters and social networks (not necessarily electronic)?

Robert Putnam has argued that deeper research into social capital, the way in which connections and networks are formed, is essential to our understanding of what is at the core of the arts ecosystem (p. 19). Our research has the potential to add to a limited amount of "careful detailed empirical work, involving in-depth ethnographies" offering "greater clarity of the processes at work in different types of clusters" and networks, some of which suggest that economic theories do not square with the working realities of artists (Kong, pp. 62-3; Di Maggio; Spencer, p. 131; Porter; Gibson; Markusen; Van Heur). Scholars like Stephen Tepper have argued that the concept of the creative economy leads to exaggerated economic expectations and a focus on impacts that distract from more important questions. Rather, he argues, "we should direct our analytical and policy energies toward better understanding how creative work and institutions are changing and what might be done to foster a more robust, more creative and more diverse cultural life" (p. 159; O'Connor, p. 400) Identifying this as an area which "needs evidence and research" (Duxbury), scholars have argued that the social and/or cultural capital generated in a creative economy is as important or more so to cohesion and sustainability as economic capital (Mercer; Throsby, 2010; Jeannotte). The connection between the arts ecology and cultural sustainability has been made especially clear in recent work undertaken within our aboriginal communities where artists have been working with youth to promote healthy lifestyles (Goulet, 2010; Goulet 2011; Linds). While the connection between a vital arts ecology and the health of individuals in a community has been embraced by the medical community (Carlson, Cox, Cueva, Archibald), the inclusion of our First Nations communities and their artists in our study will enable us to look at how the integral involvement of artists and art-making in the life of aboriginal communities is connected with practices in the broader arts ecology and/or can serve as a model for interconnections between artists and their communities elsewhere. Given the holistic nature of First Nations cultures and the extent to which "connectedness" (to the land, to elders and traditional beliefs, to an ecology encompassing humans and the natural world) gives rise to and infuses the creative work of so many First Nations artists and their communities, the diversity of approaches and knowledge they may be able to share could well provide alternative models and ways of understanding the role of artists in the arts ecology as well as securing its vitality and sustainability (McGregor, Williams).

Research Objectives

The literature review reveals the potential value to the national and international scholarly community of a quantitative and qualitative study of the role of artists in the Saskatchewan arts ecology and their professional connections. Well beyond the immediate provincial arts community, there is a need to document how the players in the arts ecology interact and form networks and what impact those connections have on art making, creativity and innovation, our economic and cultural wellbeing, and the health and sustainability of our communities. Saskatchewan artists have something to contribute to our understanding of the relative importance to creativity of "particular" audiences, "imagined" or administratively and geographically determined communities, and virtual networks. Our objectives are:

- To identify and map the distribution of artists and arts organizations, including any disciplinary specializations, within the nine districts recognized by the Ministry of Sport, Culture and Recreation
- 2. To compare the distribution of artists and their basic demographic characteristics within and among the provincial districts.
- To identify and map interactively the key networks and interconnections between artists and other artists, artists and arts organizations, artists and other segments of their "community" (geographical, disciplinary, virtual) and their contributions to local development and the economy.
- 4. To identify and map the position of artists (actual and desired) in the creative ecosystem of the province as perceived by a cross-section of individuals from outside the ranks of professional artists.
- 5. To examine in detail through focus groups and case studies the nature of specific social networks of a regional, cultural, disciplinary or virtual nature through which society and the artist are linked.
- To examine these research results in the context of current provincial cultural policies and evolving theoretical work relating to creative ecologies, creative economies and creative cities and recommend future program and policy options.

Methodology and Timelines

Objective 1: To identify and map the distribution of artists and arts organizations, including any disciplinary specializations, within the nine districts recognized by the Ministry of Sport, Culture and Recreation.

Attaining Objective 1 began in the summer of 2012 with the launch of the Arts Alliance Artist Registry, the first effort at creating a comprehensive list of provincial artists. This and other data sharing facilitated by this partnership has produced a baseline data set which is contributing to regional and disciplinary profiles. This work will continue through with Geographic Information System Technology (GIS) mapping of these data and posting of these maps to our website.

Objective 2: To compare the distribution of artists and their basic demographic characteristics within and among the provincial districts.

Objective 3: To identify and map interactively the key networks and interconnections between artists and other artists, artists and arts organizations, artists and other segments of their "community" (geographical, disciplinary, virtual) and their contributions to local development and the economy.

With the base-line data set as a sampling frame, we are addressing Objectives 2-3 through an on-line survey facilitated by the Sample Survey and Databank Unit of the Faculty of Kinesiology and Health Studies of the University of Regina. Through this survey of individuals drawn from our comprehensive list of provincial artists, we are (a) obtaining basic demographic information about the artists (such as age, gender, community of residence, ethnicity, and education) and the extent to which they conform to various official definitions of 'professional artist;' and (b) discovering existing networks and connections that contribute to the respondent's creative work, its dissemination to an audience or consumers and the generation of income from the creative work. GIS maps and social network charts will incorporate resulting data to reveal similarities and differences between the different regions and the flows of strengths of the network connections among the different regions.

Objective 4: To identify and map the position of artists (actual and desired) in the creative ecosystem of the province as perceived by a cross-section of individuals from outside the ranks of professional artists.

Objective 4 responds to Badham's call for more "data regarding public perceptions of arts activities" (21). It involves the implementation of a second survey directed at approximately 1000 provincial respondents from the adult population. It addresses the following areas: (a) basic demographic information; (b) the extent of the individual's involvement in arts and

cultural activities as well as any other ways in which they see themselves involved in the province's creative and arts ecologies (e.g., artist networks, education, charitable donations, business partnerships, etc) and (c) the perceived and desired roles of artists in the broader educational, social, economic, cultural and political dimensions of local communities or regions. Data from this survey will also be made available through the SPAR website through GIS mapping as well as reports.

Objective 5: To examine in detail through focus groups and case studies the nature of specific social networks of a regional, cultural, disciplinary or virtual nature through which society and the artist are linked.

Addressing Objective 5 will begin with initial analysis of the surveys in a report prepared for the provincial Arts Alliance Congress in May 2014. Where possible it will identify key questions for further study and the nature of the 15 focus groups which will be used to attain a more in depth and qualitative understanding of artist networks and their role in the arts ecology. We anticipate a mixture of focus groups, some composed of artists in particular disciplines or at different stages of their careers others composed of artists and other individuals from particular communities, reserves or districts. The objective will be to elicit dialogue between participants to further our understanding of the nature and degree of connectedness between artists and others in their area and the extent to which artists work within a broader creative network. Where appropriate, cultural mapping approaches will be used, not only "identifying and stating, in a written or visual inventory, all cultural assets within the geographic area" but also experimenting with more qualitative and subjective approaches (Evans, Moore, Stewart, Brennan-Horley). As observed by France Trepanier, "mapping is ... a powerful tool for building bridges to the arts" because it can "reveal where the connections are". These focus groups will begin during the Fall of 2014 and progress concurrently with the development of interactive maps to depict and analyze creative hubs or neighbourhoods and creative clusters emerging from the surveys and focus groups.

By winter 2015 we will move from the focus groups to at least 2 in-depth case studies which will involve further follow up with particular artists and their communities. They will be conducted using semi-structured qualitative research interview methods where data collection will be guided by a checklist of key "themes" and questions addressed in a conversational style. Since not all themes and questions will be appropriate for all art livelihoods and situations, the interviewers will steer the conversation to address only those which apply. The open-ended structure will also allow for elaboration on themes which may not have emerged during the initial surveys and focus groups.

Objective 6: To examine these research results in the context of current provincial cultural policies and evolving theoretical work relating to creative ecologies, creative economies and creative cities and recommend future program and policy options.

Work on addressing Objective 6 will begin with the analysis of survey results and continue with the identification of key questions to be explored in the focus groups and case studies as well as dialogue with the partner organizations and the Community of Understanding. Individual policy papers will be developed as issues emerge but a major policy paper relating to integrated policies and programs and co-authored by the partners and participants will be released at the May 2016 provincial Arts Congress.

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