The Age of Engagement in Vancouver’s Independent Theatre Sector

by

James Long

B.F.A., Simon Fraser University, 2000

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Urban Studies in the Urban Studies Program Faculty of Arts of Social Sciences

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Approval

Name: James Long
Degree: Master of Urban Studies
Title: The Age of Engagement in Vancouver’s Independent Theatre Sector
Examinining Committee: Chair: Karen Ferguson
Professor of Urban Studies and History
Nicolas Kenny
Senior Supervisor
Professor of History

Peter V. Hall
Supervisor
Professor of Urban Studies

Peter Dickinson
External Examiner
Professor of English and Contemporary Arts

Date Defended/Approved: September 19, 2018
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Abstract

This research focuses on the prioritizing of community engagement in arts and culture policy and production, specifically within Vancouver’s independent theatre sector. It concerns itself equally with how artists and policy makers define community engagement, how it is operationalized in art making and what impact the policy is having on the funding, creation and consumption of art in the urban environment. Using document analysis, interviews with a senior executive at the British Columbia Arts Council and case studies of three Vancouver based independent theatre organizations, I identify operational gaps in how community engagement policy was implemented and administered, continued uncertainty in how community engagement is defined by artists, a resulting financial precarity for some, but not all, individuals and organizations operating in the sector and some of the ways community engagement has impacted aesthetic choices. This study hopes to add to our understanding of how policy and creative practice intersect.

Keywords: Arts and culture; arts funding; instrumentalization of the arts; peer juries; community engagement.
Dedication

To my family and colleagues who allowed me the time and space to work on these questions.
Acknowledgements

Art making is a life choice. Artists bring their projects, their grants, their concerns and obsessions home to their private lives and families on a regular basis. Those included in this research participated when they could have been negotiating so many other realities attached to their lives and work and for that I feel greatly indebted. As such I would like to acknowledge all the factors, spoken and unspoken, the participating individuals contend with and allow to inform their practice, including but not limited to the realities of gender, race, class, maternity leaves, children, taste, skill, talent, administrative capacity, etc.

I would also like to acknowledge that all of those interviewed are my colleagues and, quite honestly, my competition when it comes to vying for the funding and negotiating the policy that sits at the centre of this work. Over the past year, I have taken the liberty of dissecting your art, your business practices and, essentially, your life choices. That has been a huge and enormously generous gift and I thank you for it.

I would also like to extend the same thanks to the senior executive at the BCAC who participated as an interviewee. Your continued honesty and integrity in both this research and your work is inspiring. Finally, I would like to thank my senior supervisor Nicolas Kenny, the staff and faculty at Simon Fraser Universities Masters of Urban Studies Program including Terri Evans, Peter Hall, Karen Ferguson and all the other instructors who have made my time in the program so valuable.
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## List of Acronyms

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<tr>
<td>BC</td>
<td>British Columbia</td>
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<td>BCAC</td>
<td>British Columbia Arts Council</td>
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<td>MC</td>
<td>Massey Commission</td>
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<td>PL</td>
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Chapter 1.
Introduction

I’ll begin with what I perceive to be a working example of the issues under investigation, an example that not only serves as a touchstone for the research but also a frame for why I, as a long time Vancouver based theatre artist and current student of urban studies, find myself questioning how the notion of ‘community engagement’ relates to the funding of arts and culture.

In April of 2017 The Electric Company, a theatre company based in Vancouver, received an Olivier Award for Betroffenheit, a new work created with Vancouver based choreographer Crystal Pite (Smith, 2017). This was the first time an international recognition of this stature had ever been awarded to a Vancouver based organization and an indicator of the continued evolution of performance making on the west coast of Canada. As someone who saw the work I can attest to it being one of the most complete and harrowing pieces of performance to have emerged out of this country, an opinion supported by a widespread critical response\(^1\). Ironically in light of such an accomplishment, and of specific interest to this research, just two years previous, in the same year that this work premiered in Canada, the Electric Company’s annual funding from the British Columbia Arts Council (BCAC) was cut by approximately 10% due to the organization’s lack of clear community engagement practices.

\(^1\)http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/betroffenheit-review-sadler-s-wells-crystal-pite-jonathan-young-a7680451.html
There are two important things to pull from this example for the purposes of my research. One, based on the current assessment criteria listed by the BCAC, which now includes a 25% weighing of community engagement activities alongside 50% for artistic achievement and another 25% for organizational capacity, the jury was justified in making this cut as there was no clear effort made by the Electric Company to expressly ‘engage’ any specific communities with their work other than its audience; and two I, as a working artist, producer and member of the arts community sat on the jury that supported that cut – a moment of deliberation and decision that ultimately led me to this project.

My research focuses on an increased prioritizing of community engagement in arts and culture policy and production, specifically within Vancouver’s independent theatre sector. It concerns itself equally with how artists and policy makers define community engagement, how it is operationalized in policy and creative practice and what impact its presence might be having on the funding, making and consumption of art in the urban environment.

1.1. Research Question

This research grows from two related questions. The first asks how community engagement became a British Columbia Arts Council (BCAC) funding goal in 2009, and the second asks how the goal’s inclusion impacted the programming choices of Progress Lab\(^2\) – a consortium of independent theatre organizations operating in Vancouver, British Columbia. The research was completed through the analysis of relevant press and government issued documents, interviews with a senior executive at

\(^2\) See Appendix A for a list of organizations and websites.
the BCAC, a focus group with members of Progress Lab and three case studies of Progress Lab organizations and their artistic leadership.

1.2. Context – Progress Lab

Progress Lab, of which the Electric Company is a founding member, was formed in 2004 to allow a generation of theatre organizations, most of whose founders had come out of post-secondary training in the mid 90’s to early 2000’s, to meet, socialize and discuss concepts within performance making. In addition to the various projects developed by the individual organizations, Progress Lab co-produced a trio of large-scale interactive performance events called Hive 1 (2006), Hive 2 (2008) and Hive 3 (2010). Starting with very little financial support, each iteration of Hive proved more successful and fundable, with Hive 3 eventually aligning itself with 2010’s Cultural Olympiad – a spectacle that in itself serves as a useful example of the intersection of civic engagement policies and government funding in the province during the period under investigation. In short, as a group of artists and organizations sharing a similar creative practice and collaborative ethos, Progress Lab represents a unique period of intense and collaborative theatrical productivity in the city of Vancouver – a moment that coincided with the simultaneous rise of the PuSh International Performing Arts Festival, the hosting of Canada’s National Theatre Festival in 2008, and increased national and international touring on the part of local performance organizations. Considering this activity, and the fact that eleven of the twelve organizations continue to operate in 2018, Progress Lab will be useful in measuring the shift towards community engagement and the impact this move may have had on a creative community operating in an urban setting.
1.3. Context – Community Engagement

When the words “community engagement” first appeared in the BCAC’s 2008/09 Annual Report (British Columbia Arts Council, 2009b) they were part of a one sentence goal that sat third in a list of four. By the 2015/16 Annual Report, community engagement had moved up a rung to be the second goal and now included multiple bullet points specific to the engagement of “youth, health, education, tourism, social services, business and government” (British Columbia Arts Council, 2016). The perceived potential of arts and culture to support societal resiliency, urban regeneration and economic growth via community engagement is expanding and the responsibility for fulfilling this potential is increasingly being shifted into the hands of the artist (Bishop, 2012; Harvie, 2013). However, a frequently cited difficulty of working to fulfill the community engagement mandate is the ambiguity of its definition (Brown & Novak-Leonard, 2011; Tepper & Ivey, 2008; Bishop, 2012) as engagement can mean anything from attending a gallery, to filling out a survey, to directly participating in the creation and enactment of a performance (Matarasso, 1998; Brown, 2008). Regardless of artistic purpose, scholars agree that the public’s experience and expectations of arts and culture are changing (Jones, 2017) and government, arts councils and artists are expected to facilitate that evolution.

The shift towards increased community engagement in the arts is not unique to British Columbia but is also occurring at a national level (Brault, 2010), in the US (Brown & Ratzkin, 2011) and most certainly in the United Kingdom, a nation that is in the midst of a two decade long push to find new ways to directly engage the public in the planning, creation and dissemination of creative products and events (Harvie, 2013; Matarasso, 1998). As my literature review will outline, the UK experience of engagement and participatory art practice has been the subject of repeated study. Where a scholarly gap
remains is in how a prioritizing of engagement in B.C. is specifically impacting the practices of the artists working in the city of Vancouver, how this may be reciprocally impacting the work being consumed by audiences and ultimately, how this might all combine to inform the urban experience.

1.4. Relevance and Applicability

At the core of this research lies a belief that there is an inherent and positive good inside the consumption of a creative product (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007) – that through art and culture, individuals are provided an opportunity to collectively reflect on how they might co-exist as a society (Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee (Canada), 1982). Dominant forms of entertainment like Hollywood movies or popular television provide this opportunity to reflect on a global scale and turn a profit while doing so, therefore requiring no subsidy on the part of the taxpayer. It is a capital driven model representing demand and supply at its purest – many people want a product, a product is made for easy consumption, many people pay for it, and more of the same is made with the profits. That said, the capacities of these globally intended products to reflect the various nuances specific to a local urban environment remain open to debate (Harvey, 2006). As a rule, to which there are few exceptions, less popular cultural products like independent film, dance, theatre, visual art, poetry etc., speak to smaller audiences and have to rely on tax payer dollars to be realized – a supply and demand model that does not align as easily with contemporary capital driven and neoliberal ideologies.

A puzzle for government lies in the conundrum that if the cultural products that fewer people enjoy need the most public money to be made, can this spending still be justified in the name of something as ephemeral and difficult to measure as public good
or even less clear, artistic achievement? Moving forward can, or should, this spending be better justified under the umbrella of community engagement, a term increasingly used in the arts and culture funding realm to rationalize, support and shape artistic enterprise?

With these considerations in mind, I use the following research to consider how the cultural fabric of a city best realizes itself, and to that effect, what are the best funding strategies for a region interested in both reflecting its population’s wishes and developing its global image. What is the artist’s role in supporting the identity, growth and social resiliency of a metropolitan area? Is the artist or artist driven organization capable of directly addressing these urban concerns or is the artist better suited to offering more oblique criticisms or responses to the societal issues surrounding them? I also explore any internal impacts felt by a community responding to policies that appear to be as informed by economic as aesthetic concerns.

I would suggest the answers are myriad but funder policy or mechanism does not always allow for myriad avenues of attack. The core responsibility of the funder is to allocate dollars to artists and organizations based on what is determined to be best for the art and the region’s health. This places the funder inside the enigma of having to make space for artistic license while also adhering to a mandate handed down from their own respective funders – in this case a provincial government committed to developing a creative economy in service of the region’s global reputation. When planning trends increasingly favour spectacle (Jakob, 2013), the public craves new and personalized forms of entertainment (Jones, 2017) and regional governments have to be as equally concerned with questions of international reputation, tourism and urban regeneration, where does this leave the independent theatre artist or organization whose training and ideologies may be better suited to older, more traditional forms of cultural production?
Chapter 2.
Conceptual Framework

To provide a framework for understanding why the British Columbia Arts Council (BCAC) turned to community engagement as a funding priority and how the artists of Vancouver’s Progress Lab responded to this shift, I will utilize three bodies of scholarship. The first provides a summary of the continuing discussion surrounding the value of art in society and arguments for and against the funding of artists and arts organizations. The second examines how concepts of engagement are being defined and operationalized in arts policy conversations and also being challenged by some scholars. The final area outlines scholarship that considers why and how artists may be shifting their practice in relation to public policy and neoliberal agendas.

2.1. Public Good: Externalities and Funding in the Arts.

Attempts to attach or detach measures of value to art have been ongoing since the time of Ancient Greece. In a summary of this debate, cultural policy scholars Eleonora Belfiore and Oliver Bennett identify three main camps inside the conversation (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007): the Platonic school that rejects any “epistemological role of the arts” (143); the Aristotelian assurance of the arts’ “capacity to educate the masses” (144); and Immanuel Kant’s “purposiveness without a purpose” logic that suggests art “does not make the poor less poor, it does not sustain the hungry, it does not diminish suffering or redress injustice.’ (John Pope-Hennessy in B&B, 146). In Kantian thinking, art is autonomous and should only be considered in the elevated realm of the aesthetic, a.k.a. art for art’s sake.

The debate over art’s value continues today but for economic rather than philosophical reasons. Belfiore and Bennett go so far as to claim that “without [public]
funding, without the provocation of a cultural policy that privileges and legitimizes some manifestations of art rather than others, the debate about value would most likely become a recondite affair” (135). They claim it is not the stand-alone art that is of concern, but the larger benefit that society and citizens receive for their investment of tax dollars. For Canada and its provinces, that system of investment and return rests in the hands of the country’s various arts councils.

In 1951, the Canadian Massey Commission first recommended “the creation and support of several national and provincial institutions to ‘pump prime’ the supply of artistic products” (Low 2017, 237). These tax-dollar supported bodies were designed “to support a shift in responsibility for arts funding from private philanthropy to the state” (Upchurch, 2016, vi), while still operating at an arms-length from government in assisting artists to supply cultural items that “were unable to operate within the principles of economics” (Low 2017, 237). The purpose of these new institutions hybridized Kant’s autonomous idea of ‘art for art’s sake’ with the intent of achieving Aristotle’s public education. Some of the resulting institutions formed in the decades following the Massey Commission included the National Library of Canada, the Canadian Film Development Corporation (Telefilm), a system of ”a large auditorium style” and “properly equipped for drama” (Voaden in Hawkins, 1998), regional theatres supplying a Eurocentric and text based style of theatre, and The Canada Council for the Encouragement of the Arts, Letters, Humanities, and Social Sciences, now known as the Canada Council for the Arts.

The British Columbia Arts Council was founded almost 50 years after the Massey Commission’s report was published, and while similar in stated intent and suggested arm’s length relationship to its respective provincial government (British Columbia Arts Council, 2010), the BCAC’s differing origins are critical to understanding
its growing emphasis on the social utility of art. In her book, *The Origins of the Arts Council Movement*, Anna Upchurch describes how The Canada Council was seeded with 100 million dollars of estate taxes from two Canadian industrialist millionaires. She goes on to describe the Massey Commission as an elite cultural “clerisy”\(^3\) doing something for society “that society, unaided, could not do for itself” (Upchurch 2016, 52).

In contrast, Duncan Low, in his 2017 study of British Columbia’s arts sector under 10 years (2001-2011) of Liberal rule, outlines how the BCAC was legislated into existence by an elected government responding to an international shift from an “intrinsic to *instrumental* focus on the arts” (Low 2017, 238). Low also points out how BC’s economy at the time had been undergoing a significant shift from resource to service based industries, and that the “cultural sectors were viewed as instruments of economic development” (233). So, like the Canada Council, the *public good* may have been one of the original goals inside the British Columbia’s arts funding model, but it was a public good that sought *external public benefits* extending beyond the aesthetic.

The belief in art and culture’s capacity to provide external benefits to the public has its detractors. In his frequently cited 1991 piece questioning the positive social impacts of arts funding, economist Don Fullerton asserts that “government should not subsidize every good that becomes expensive or obsolete” (Fullerton 1991, 69), particularly when that good benefits a very small set of the population who, ironically, may be in the least need of public help. In making this point, Fullerton cites a study from the 1980s that claims that even when admission fees were waived, “only 8 percent of the population accounted for 18 percent of the visits to art museums; while the bottom

\(^3\) The Oxford English Dictionary defines Clerisy as “a distinct class of learned or literary people.”
income group representing 8 percent of the population accounted for about 2 percent of visits to the same.” While Baumol and Bowen blame a lack of cross-class exposure to arts and culture as one of the reasons for this disparity (2006), and Low (2016) calls on stronger arts-in-school programs as one of the solutions, governments tasked with approving budgets for their arts councils are under increased pressure to show more substantive public return for their arts and culture investment.

One potential impact of this increased pressure to demonstrate social impact is the imposition of governmental agendas on the creation and dissemination of arts and culture, a practice Duncan Low sees as “encroachment” (Low 2016, 5), or a “gradual advance beyond usual or acceptable limits” (Ibid). He localizes this practice of encroachment in B.C. by noting how in the late 2000s, the provincial Liberal government cut the BCAC’s funding by nearly 50 per cent and “eliminated Gaming Grants to adult arts programs” (Low 2017, 193), in favour of arts and culture programs directly administered by the government. While Low’s study focuses on the 2010 Vancouver Olympics as a central inciting element for these funding changes, it is worth noting that these shifts occurred within 6 months of ‘Community Engagement’ appearing as a funding priority in the BCAC’s 2008/09 annual report, a coincidence that will be fleshed out further in this research. Gaming funding was reinstated following massive protests, but as a 2015 Hill Strategies report explains, “the majority of British Columbia Arts organizations still receive less funding from provincial and federal government sources than similar organizations in other provinces” (Hill, 2015).

In summary, regardless of the origins of the nation’s funding systems or arm’s length philosophies inside funding allocation, scholars agree that arts and culture is no longer treated as an autonomous public good. Arts councils are subject to the same pressures as any other sector reliant on government support and thus susceptible to
political influence or encroachment on their operations. One of the means by which this influence may be presenting itself in B.C. is through policies that encourage increased community engagement on the part of artists. Research on how community engagement is defined, operationalized and subsequently critiqued makes up the next section of this literature review.

2.2. Engagement Practice: Definition and Critique

As noted in the introduction, ‘community engagement’ as a funding priority grew significantly since its first appearance in the BCAC’s 2008/09 annual report (British Columbia Arts Council, 2009b) to its expanded form in 2015/16 (Province of British Columbia 2016, 11). What remains consistent however is how the terms participation and engagement are used interchangeably throughout the preceding and interceding BC government publications – an interchange also present inside various other national and international policy and scholarly documents that consider how the public could be better integrated into creative practice (Matarasso, 1998; Brown 2008, 2014; Brown and Novak-Leonard 2011; Litzenberger, 2013). The Canada Council for the Arts provides a typical example of this fluidity of language relating to engagement in its 2012 discussion paper outlining their understanding of the trend. Within the document its writers mention everything from “cultural democracy” to “cultural vitality” to “expressive life”, before finally landing on an extensive statement claiming that, “the common themes running through these definitions of engagement include the value of personal participation, holistic impacts on people’s lives… and the role of art in building social capital” (Canada Council for the Arts. 2012, 7). To summarize, engagement is used to encapsulate a vast variety of intents and purposes, but for most researchers and scholars the notion of a direct public participation appears to sit at the core.
In his *Making Sense of Audience Engagement*, arts researcher Alan Brown acknowledges “there is no generally accepted set of terms to describe arts participation, but an evolving lexicon of words and phrases that describe how people encounter and express their creative selves and share in the creativity of others.” (Brown and Novak-Leonard 2011, 6). Arts and culture scholar Steven Tepper, goes further to suggest that audiences are no longer content to just sit and watch but are now in search of an ‘exuberant expression of the self’ (Jones 2017), and it is a *self* that has changed in recent decades. According to Tepper, “if you had asked random Americans in 1950 if they thought themselves important, about 12 percent of them would have said yes. By the 1990s, that number had risen to 85 percent” (Ibid). The public has come to demand a personal *participation* in culture, particularly if they are paying for it through tax dollars. They don’t necessarily need to be on a stage, but there is a desire for new forms of agency in the choices they make relating to their cultural consumption. This agency can take multiple forms, including, but not limited to, the self-curation of a festival experience, more direct lines of feedback to the creative artist and, indeed, participating in the making of the art itself.

In 2011, the former Director and CEO of the Canada Council, Robert Sirman, responding to what he considered a shifting public relationship to the arts, wrote that ‘the time had come to recalibrate the arts agenda from “supply” to “demand”’ (Sirman, 2011). The *supply* (artist-centric) vs. *demand* (audience driven) argument has been fundamental to the arts funding debate for many years (Low, 2016). To simplify, supply gives primary agency to the artist, i.e. fund the artist and they will supply the public with what they need. Demand however, places the power in the hands of the public who, via any number of means, ask the artists and funders for what they need to feel culturally satisfied.
The difference between supply and demand also helps with how I will differentiate between *engagement* and *participation* inside this study. Where engagement suggests a more passive or generalized exposure to what is *supplied*, participation actively places the audience on an equal footing with the artist. Participation is more suggestive of public *demand* and provides clearer parameters for arts organizations as they develop programming focused on public involvement. Based on this, I will rely on the concept of *participation* and the various modes by which the artist might integrate the public into the visioning, creation and dissemination of arts and culture, as a primary term of reference for this work – an interdependence also summarized as “with, by and for” a community.

Francois Matarasso’s 1997 study of the UK arts sector is a seminal piece of literature supporting widespread public participation in arts and culture. In his work he lists no less than 50 positive social impacts\(^4\) of participation, which he later groups into the six themes of: personal development, social cohesion, local image and identity, imagination and vision, health and well-being, and community empowerment and self-determination (Matarasso, 1998). What is pertinent for funders considering the wider integration of participation into their policies is how Matarasso makes clear that “participation is not a euphemism for *community arts*” (Foreword), a practice generally associated with amateurism and consequently separated from professional art practice. Rather, his “study interprets [participation] as broadly embracing work with many different values and motivations” (Ibid). Matarasso claims that “the case for supporting participatory arts projects arises principally from their contribution to social policy objectives” (76) and can do anything from “increase people’s confidence and sense of self-worth” (social impact # 1) to being a “means of gaining insight into political and

\(^4\) See Appendix B
social ideas" (social impact # 23) etc. As an added benefit for governments interested in the cost effectiveness of funding allocations, participatory art practice according to Matarasso can also be more “cheap, flexible, responsive, quick to deliver results and effective” (76) than traditional social programs.

Art critic and historian Claire Bishop suggests a critical counterpoint to Matarasso’s rosy view. In her 2012 book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* she argues that funding systems that prioritize public participation fail at both producing real social change and supporting the creation of good art. She grounds her thesis in what she considers to be the essential political function of the artist to push against the status quo – a function she feels public participation focused work fails to accomplish. For Bishop, the practice of “not taking into account the aesthetic elements of these projects is tantamount to maintaining, rather than rupturing the status quo that these projects claim to challenge” (Bishop in Eschenburg 2014). She instead prioritizes the small p political impact of well-made art over the social impact an intentionally participatory process aims to achieve via public inclusion.

Harkening back to Kant’s *purposiveness without purpose* logic, Bishop relies heavily on French philosopher Ranciere’s concept of *aesthesis* which she summarizes as “an autonomous regime of experience that is not reducible to logic, reason or morality” (Bishop 2012, 18) to make her points. For Bishop, the primary social function of the work programmed by artists is to expose social ills, not attend to them, as Matarasso would suggest. Like Low, she points to the shortening of the arm’s length relationship that funders have to government as problematic, going even further to suggest that official policies attempting to conflate art making with the intents and purposes of social work ultimately expose the practitioner, product, and consumer to neoliberal governments no longer interested in doing the work themselves. She concludes that the
artist, once counted upon for questioning the state, has unknowingly become its instrument inside this growing participatory art practice, and the public, through their willing participation, have become submissive citizens “who respect authority and have come to accept the ‘risk’ and responsibility of looking after themselves in the face of diminished public services” (Ibid, 14). What is of note for the following section of this literature review is that throughout her work, Bishop places as much blame on the artist as the policy maker in what she fears could be the new normal in creative practice.

2.3. Artist Labour in the Creative Economy

Where the first two sections of this literature review provide a framework for determining why the BCAC may have decided to include community engagement as a funding goal in the first place, the following section aims to conceptualize how policy shifts toward community engagement might impact the programming choices and behaviour of artists working in the urban setting. It does so by first considering how working environments impact creative choices; second, by outlining how the neoliberal principles of precarious employment, entrepreneurship and competition have been integrated into community engagement practice and funding models; and finally, by listing some of the impacts experienced by United Kingdom artists working under similar conditions over the last two decades.

Over the last 40 years French sociologist Pierre-Michel Menger has developed an extensive body of research considering how artists not only operate but survive in careers marked by instability. Menger has concluded that these individuals are less like ‘rational fools’ and more like Bayesian actors, adopting strategies for managing risk and

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5 Bayes' law or Bayes' rule is used in statistics and probability theory to describe the probability of an event, based on prior knowledge of conditions that might be related to the event. (Wiki)
uncertainty” (Raţiu and Lang 2012). Menger also suggests that artists survive because they are willingly and consciously flexible in bending to the demands of market driven economies – as creative in their entrepreneurial spirit as they are in creating works of art.

William Deresiewicz agrees, calling “the notion of the artist as a solitary genius — so potent a cultural force, so determinative, still, of the way we think of creativity in general – decades out of date” (Deresiewicz, Jan/Feb2015). Rather than pointing to abstract notions of creative inspiration, both Menger and Deresiewicz agree that a work of art, be it a painting, a symphony or a play etc., is the “result of the interaction of three factors: work (effort and endurance); talent (inter-individual difference); and randomness (the unpredictable and uncontrollable properties of its environment)” (Raţiu & Lang, 2012). To summarize, the choice to make one piece of art over another and the details then present in its execution are as much the result of the environment (socio, political or otherwise) in which it emerges as any ephemeral thought that inspires it.

Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt define the current creative environment by its pervasive "precarity" (Gill & Pratt, 2008). While the origins of precarity as a social movement can be linked back to classic Marxism, precarity as a post-Fordist labour concept is commonly associated with a variety of working conditions that include “temporary, intermittent and precarious jobs; long hours and bulimic patterns of working; the collapse or erasure of the boundaries between work and play… and a passionate attachment to the work and to the identity of creative labourer” (Gill and Pratt 2008,14). These are qualities that characterize the employment patterns of many artists moving from project to project inside what is now widely identified as the creative economy (Howkins, 2001; Florida, 2002).
Over the last two decades the creative labourers, or creatives populating this economy “have become the apple of the policymaker’s eye” (Ross in Ibid, 13). David Lee describes creative labourers as the designers, consultants, artists etc. who serve as “the primary means within society of producing symbolic goods and texts within a capitalist society” (Lee 2013, 1). Lee goes on to cite numerous studies describing the ability of these creative labourers to affect “economic, social and cultural change” (Ibid), often in lieu of any job security – a capacity that has come to be celebrated by some 21st century urbanists like Richard Florida (Florida, 2002).

Richard Florida’s often cited and equally critiqued (Peck, 2005; Keil, 2009), study of the creative labourer, The Rise of The Creative Class, has had a wide impact on urban planning in the western world, including British Columbia and its largest city, Vancouver, both of which include artists as core agents of growth in their respective economic growth and urban regeneration plans (Province of British Columbia, 2017b; City of Vancouver, 2011). In fact “few could have anticipated that artists, writers, filmmakers, designers and others would have come… to take centre stage as a supposed ‘creative class’ endowed with almost mythical qualities” (Florida in Gill and Pratt 2008, 13), in the 21st century. That said, scholars agree that regardless of Florida’s wide and continued impact on urban cultural planning, neither the rewards nor the costs of these ‘mythical qualities’ of flexibility and creativity have not been equally distributed. In fact, rather than establishing a creative and financial equilibrium, the creative economy theory as suggested by Florida is just as likely to “justify urban restructuring measures in favour of certain functional elites within the neoliberal model of society” (Krätke 2010, 836) thus increasing the uncertainty of the artist trying to negotiate an increasingly precarious working environment.
Nadine Kalin labels the celebration of artist insecurity as economic stimulant a “colonization of creativity” (Kalin 2016, 37). Aligning herself with Claire Bishop, Kalin suggests that the blending of creative enterprise with neoliberal ideology “sets the terms for the demise of creativity’s unproductive, critical, and activist forms” (Ibid, 42). Rather than push back against the hyper-capitalism shaping their practice, artists willingly adapt to “the unpredictable and uncontrollable properties of [their] environment” (Raţiu and Lang 2012, 120) by pursuing multiple projects and new roles including that of community facilitator or participatory art practitioner. Where Menger would recognize this flexibility as a much valued perseverance, other scholars might label this behaviour as “roll with it neoliberalism” (Keil, 2009) wherein artists have the potential to succeed or fail based on an entrepreneurial willingness and capacity to shape grant proposals and projects to policy. In this model, and irrespective of genuine interest or even ability, artists move away from fighting for their identity as autonomous creators and warp their practice to whatever the funder calls for. One of the consequences of this shift, particularly inside of community engagement practice is a proliferation of work Bishop labels as “worthy but dull” (Bishop in interview with Barok, 2009): projects that may serve some kind of social purpose, but leave much to be desired with respect to audience experience.

An associated complication for artists is increased competition for project specific funding. In her research into funding within the non-profit sector (Scott, 2003), Katherine Scott cites a trend in the non-profit sector towards one-off project funding as opposed to increases in core or operational funding for organizations. For context, operating or core funded organizations receive a guaranteed amount of annual revenues from government each year to support their ongoing activities. This security allows for longer term planning, administrative support, salaries and additional resources to help develop projects. Operating organizations also have the opportunity to apply for the project
based funding to supplement this ongoing activity. In contrast, organizations working at a project level are limited to applying for one-off funding which have very little allowance for supporting ongoing administrative work (Ibid). While operating companies have additional funder requirements to satisfy and some individual project grants can far exceed an annual allotment, operating organizations are much better positioned to satisfy their mandates because of the stability the annual funds offer.

According to Scott, “there has been a marked shift away from a core funding model” (Scott, 2003, xiv) in the non-profit sector. For Scott, increases in project or proposal based models, while aligned with an entrepreneurial or creative economy ethos, comes with worrisome trends including, increases in organizational volatility which can undermine “an organization’s stability and its capacity to provide consistent, quality programs or services, to plan ahead, and to retain experienced staff”; “mission drift” for organizations finding themselves repeatedly pursuing unique projects as opposed programming attached to their original mandates; “reporting overload”; “loss of infrastructure” and “human resource fatigue” as staff find themselves chasing multiple individual grants as opposed to (or in the case of operating organizations, addition to) annual, or biennial core funding applications. Scott’s research shows that,

> “the capacity of the non-profit and voluntary sector to fulfill its important role in Canadian society is being undermined and eroded by new funding strategies that are intended to increase accountability, self-sufficiency and competition” (Scott, 2003, xiii).

What’s relevant for this study is how this swing towards project specific funding may be impacting the programming choices, organizational behaviour and capacity of organizations to bend creative impulse to funding priorities in light of community engagement becoming a condition of funding at the BCAC.
Jen Harvie in her 2013 book *Fair Play: Art Performance and Neoliberalism*, offers some examples of how the contemporary artist is both ‘rolling with’ and occasionally pushing back against governmental arts policies that favour economic growth and by association, increased community engagement. Her research enjoys the benefit of hindsight by focusing on the United Kingdom’s arts and culture sector, a sector that has been subject to the rollout of neoliberal informed programming and engagement policies since, at least, New Labour’s election in 1997 – 12 years prior to community engagement appearing as a goal at the BCAC. In her work, Harvie finds that increased capitalist inspired entrepreneurialism in the arts and culture sector comes with three associated risks: increased individualism and competition in the sector; demands for constant innovation; and inflated expectations of productivity/profitability.

In her consideration of individualism, Harvie rejects the neoliberal notion that “only inequality has the capacity to create a dynamic that stimulates the desires, instincts and brains of individuals” (Lazzarato in Harvie, 81). She goes on to provide examples of British artists “resisting social atomization by retaining and expanding strong social networks” (Harvie 2013, 82) in the face of increased governmental encroachment. Harvie provides examples of artists behaving like “modern day Robin Hoods [who] redistribute resources in ways that challenge existing hierarchies” (Ibid). It is a hopeful assessment, though some critics like William Deresiewicz might point to her use of the word ‘network’ in itself as a type of blindness to the ongoing creep of neoliberal capitalism – *network* being a term drawn from business to replace the *circle* previously used by artists to describe their community of associates (Deresiewicz, Jan/Feb 2015).

Harvie’s second concern is with the demand for constant innovation inside the neoliberal model. For Harvie, artists by nature should be seeking new methods, but not at the expense of the body of work that has come before. This constant discarding of the
old in search of the new is something Nadine Kalin defines as “destructive creativity” (Kalin, 2016). Citing Harvie, Kalin suggests that while “creative destruction” may lead to “economic, social, and cultural benefits, alongside these advantages we also find increased levels of risk, inequality, instability, and crisis” for artists (37), a precarity exacerbated by policies asking arts and culture practitioners to provide social impacts not historically connected to their work.

Harvie’s third concern is with neoliberal capitalism’s relentless “focus on cultivation of productivity, wealth and profit’ (95), an agenda she claims can stand in opposition to the making of good art. In making her point she cites consecutive UK government and Arts Council of England documents that encourage increased entrepreneurialism on the part of the artist in order “make ‘markets grow’ and ‘the creative economy enter… a new period of competitiveness’.” (96), something she sees as a direct challenge to the creative time and space necessary to produce quality work. In exploring this crisis of capitalism, she cites the work of urbanist Richard Sennett and his consideration of craft – something he associates with ‘positive values of quality workmanship, concern with quality over quantity, self-satisfaction for the worker and a healthy integration of thinking and making…” (97). For Sennett, craft works in opposition to the speed of neoliberal productivity; craft is egalitarian – anyone can become good at something specific if freed from the need for start-up funds or the pressure to produce in an efficient and profitable manner. The true craftsperson is an autonomous entity, accountable only to the crafts they make, and provided the craft is of high enough quality, the only engagement activity they need bother with is making it visible to the public. To Sennett’s point, Harvie provides examples of well-established UK based artists like Grayson Perry, Jeremy Deller etc. who continue to create slow, well-crafted and ‘art for art’s sake’ works, even in the face of entrepreneurial pressures.
One gap Harvie neglects to address in the craft vs. productivity debate is how these same entrepreneurial and engagement pressures that Perry and Deller deflect might be impacting artists of lesser pedigree – artists who may not have the economic or artistic capacity to carry on inside the creative economy and, as a result, turn to community engagement as the next best, and fundable, thing.

2.4. Summary

Part one of this literature review examined scholarship suggesting governments are increasingly encroaching on the funding decisions being made by arts councils to further agendas pertaining more directly the economic health of the province and its largest city Vancouver, the global branding opportunities that came with the 2010 Olympic Games and the continued instrumentalizing of its artists to provide programming in service of urban resiliency. Part two offered policy documents and academic research that demonstrated the extensive spread of engagement practice and suggested that participation may be a more operable term when considering the public’s relationship to cultural products. Finally, part three provided a framework for understanding how the artist may be turning to models of participatory practice as a means of surviving in an increasingly competitive creative economy and satisfying governments intent on instrumentalizing the artist as a tool for urban regeneration and development.

With all this in hand, the following chapter outlines the methodologies and data analysis methods I have employed in asking how community engagement became a British Columbia Arts Council (BCAC) funding goal in 2009 and how its inclusion may have impacted the programming choices of Progress Lab.
Chapter 3.
Methodology

The research was comprised of a mixed-method approach that relied on a variety of data sources including: policy documents and media materials; two, hour-long interviews with a BCAC senior staff member; a focus group with members of Progress Lab; and case studies, comprised of interview data and quantitative statistical analysis, of three Progress Lab organizations and their artistic leaders.

3.1. How Did Community Engagement Become a Priority?

The answer to part one of the research question emerged as a background/context chapter that focuses on the decade preceding engagement’s arrival as a BCAC funding priority. The data is comprised primarily of BCAC developed documents, media reports specific to the 1996–2010 period; and two semi-structured interviews with a senior staff member of the BCAC.

Documents
The following materials provided the basis of my document analysis.

• British Columbia Arts Council Annual Reports covering the eight years previous to engagement’s inclusion in 2009 as a funding priority and the seven years immediately following.

• BC Arts Council Board Charter outlining the legal relationship that the BCAC board has to the BC population, artists and non, and the corresponding arms-length relationship the BCAC should have to government.

• Media reports covering BC arts funding cuts: Multiple pieces of journalism covering the founding of the BCAC and the Liberal government’s cuts to the BCAC and Gaming Funds immediately leading up to the 2010 Vancouver Olympics.
3.2. Elite Interview

The primary intent of the first interview with Senior Management\(^6\) was to explore their perspectives on the lead-up to engagement’s integration in 2009. Areas of conversation included inquiries into whose needs the BCAC imagined they were responding to with an increased focus on community engagement; what perceived gaps they hoped to fill; whether the BCAC was responding to policy trends in the local, national and/or international sectors; whether the work already being created by artists in the province influenced the swing towards community engagement; and, how Senior Management feels this has impacted theatre making in the province. See Appendix B for the Senior Management interview script. The first interview was conducted January 18, 2018 and a follow up conversation was held on March 5, 2018.

The interviews, combined with the preceding document analysis, combined to provide a picture of the institutional, political and social influences leading to the integration of community engagement by the BCAC in 2008/09. With this information I then focused my attention on the artists and organizations working in the sector, beginning with a focus group of individuals representing eight of the twelve organizations that make up Progress Lab.

3.3. Impacts on Programming

The focus group was split into two sections. The first hour involved the collaborative drawing of a timeline detailing the programming of the Progress Lab companies between 2000 and the present. Without preamble save basic instructions, participants were asked to use black markers to mark programming deemed to be

\(^6\) For purposes of anonymity, this individual will be cited as Senior Management throughout the writing.
traditional and red markers for activity deemed to be community engagement driven. If participants were unsure, or felt a program might be a hybrid of the two, they were asked to write it down in black and circle in red. In addition to creating a physical document, the time lining process was useful in sparking conversation, jogging memory and locating areas of interest that were then used to drive the following discussion portion of the group.

The second hour of the focus group was a conversation specific to the participant experience of community engagement post-2009 and how it may have impacted programming choices. This conversation proved useful in exploring the dynamics of the now 15-year-old Progress Lab, tracking differences in their recall and understanding of the issues under investigation, revealing evidence of any of the trends (increased entrepreneurialism, competition, precarity, etc.) set out in part three of the literature review, and helping to determine which organizations to approach as case studies. Much of the data collected in this second hour was dedicated to answering part two of the research question specific to programming.

For the analysis, I relied on the three foci of my literature review – notions of public good, public engagement/participation, and artist labour – as the primary codes to track inside the data. This resulted in the emergence of multiple other sub-codes as I worked though the material, particularly the data gathered in the case study potion of the research.

3.4. Case Studies

The case studies are made up of a quantitative and qualitative analysis of three PL organizations representing differing responses to engagement as a funding priority.
The qualitative portion consisted of a statistical and financial analysis of information contained in each organization’s respective CADAC reports. CADAC (Canadian Arts Data/Données sur les arts au Canada) is a collective effort by federal, provincial and municipal arts funders to create a common database of annual financial and statistical data on publicly funded arts organizations in Canada. Utilized by municipal, provincial and federal arts councils, CADAC assembles over 50 financial variables from operating expenses to how revenue is generated or spent across project categories. The statistical grouping is as comprehensive as the financial data and includes everything from number of individuals employed, to number of public served, to types of programs operated.

For the purposes of this research and for both understanding and comparing the three organizations, the most useful financial measures contained in CADAC were total annual revenues, revenue sources as split up into public, earned and contributed, and funding derived specifically from the BCAC. Statistically, I relied on total audience numbers, amount of audience specifically attending community and educational projects and the number of projects the organizations classified as community arts projects. The data was downloaded directly from the CADAC website using the user names and passwords provided by the three participants. Using Excel, this information was cleaned, reassembled and combined into a series of spreadsheets that were then adapted into the charts present in the following chapters.

It is worth noting here that CADAC is comprised of both audited (financial) and unaudited (statistical) information and should be read as such. This is not to accuse the individual organizations of anything resembling dishonest statistical reporting but to instead acknowledge that some organizations may be working with different definitions or measures of audience/participant accounting.
With this numerical information in hand, I turned my attention to the leaders of the organizations via semi-structured, hour-long interviews using the same script of questions as a launching pad (see Appendix C). Without exception, the interviews went over the agreed upon hour and were followed by email exchanges instigated by the participants. As hoped, the areas of interest specific to community engagement varied significantly for the participants depending on a number of variables including organizational stability, aesthetic interest and creative histories.

Similar to the analysis of the elite interview and part one of the focus group, I followed a standard thematic analysis model as outlined in Virginia Braun & Victoria Clarke’s *Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology*. The six step method consists of familiarizing yourself with the data (interviewing, listening and transcribing): generating initial codes: searching for themes: reviewing themes: defining and naming themes: and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The original intention was to use Nvivo to complete the analysis but I found a more traditional method of cutting, pasting and highlighting in Word as useful an analytical tool.

### 3.5. Ethical and Methodological Considerations

Reflexivity has remained an ongoing focus throughout this study. As the artistic director of a local theatre company, founding member of Progress Lab and one of the more active and admittedly entrepreneurial adapters to the new demands of community engagement within the Progress Lab community, I recognize the attention I must pay to any tendencies towards bias in this research as well as my potential to sway the opinion of the participants. I am, what Guba and Lincoln refer to as a “passionate participant” in the research (Guba and Lincoln 2000), collaborating with colleagues to investigate a topic that has a direct impact on our livelihoods, creative identities and careers. Carolyn
Chew-Graham’s 2002 research into interviewing fellow professionals ‘bound together by a powerful set of common experiences and attributions of professional identity’ (Chew-Graham et al 2002, 286) highlights some of the ethical considerations and blind spots that can affect the quality of the data gained including; the imposition of ‘feelings and opinions about the field [that could] govern the dialogue and interpretation’ (Chew-Graham et al 2002, 288); what it is I am both ‘seeing and not seeing” (Russell and Kelly in Watt 2007, 82) and any ‘conceptual blindness’ or perceived ‘shared understandings’ (Chew-Graham et al 2002, 287), I share with my participants.

This is particularly true of the focus group process that saw a collection of peers gathering together under the moderation of another peer (myself) and where “the moderators personal skills and attributes [could] have a considerable influence on the nature and quality of the data gathered” (Sim 1998, 345). The fact that those gathered were already intricately tied under the same purpose and social network risked, and perhaps led to a certain homogeneity in perspective – even though many differing impressions of engagement may have been present. To help mitigate any dominance or conformity in view I attempted to keep the focus group moderation and/or questions as neutral as possible; avoided revealing any specific biases in the research prior to or during the meeting or interviews; and came equipped with examples of positive and negative instances of engagement practice to help the conversation when it became dominated by certain perspectives. The ultimate goal was to gently moderate and observe while still keeping the discourse lively enough for a variety of perspectives to emerge.

An additional concern with the peer-to-peer issue arises in the fact that the individuals being studied, both in the focus group and case studies, depend on the funding provided by the BCAC for their organizational and personal livelihoods, which
undoubtedly governed some of the opinions being offered. To mitigate any concerns participants may have had, I have assured participant confidentiality practices in all reporting including the use of pseudonyms and the changing of project and company names. However, this information, once in combination with the statistical and financial data indicating comparative sizes of the organizations, mandates and creative histories etc. makes full confidentially difficult. Should someone really wish to put the time and research into flushing out the true identities of the participants it may be possible to do so and this reality has been discussed with the participants. To this end I have committed to further disguising the details of the study should the work be repurposed for further publication.

With all this in mind, the next chapter will begin with asking how engagement arose as a priority at the BCAC.
Chapter 4.
The Rise of Engagement as a Funding Priority

In the spring of 2009, amidst significant arts funding turmoil and a second term of BC Liberal rule, “community engagement” first appeared as a funding priority in the BCAC’s new five-year strategic plan (British Columbia Arts Council, 2009a). This chapter explores some of the intersecting influences that may have led to community engagement’s arrival, beginning with the most integral – the BCAC’s 1996 origins as a quasi-arm’s-length government agency charged with sparking a struggling BC economy. It is this beginning stage, one that overestimated the economic potential of the province’s artists inside of what would come to be known as its creative economy, that would continue influence the BCAC’s actions over the next 13 years and inform the agency’s “fly under the radar” (Senior Management, 2018b) approach to intergovernmental relations. In addition to exploring this origin story, the following pages will also point to the associated factors of interdisciplinary pressures from the visual arts and social practice disciplines, a desire to increase access for underrepresented artistic voices and an internal drive to increase the social relevancy of the BCAC as further reason for their developing desire to encourage the province’s artists to deepen their community impact.

The literature review points to neoliberal agendas, like those imposed by the BC Liberal government during the 2000s, as a driving force behind community engagement’s rise as a funding priority. While it would be naïve to suggest that an atmosphere of economic expectation on the part of BC government was absent inside the priority’s development, describing it as coming from the top down would be incorrect. The pressure might be better described as quietly environmental, in that there were little to no direct demands placed on the council to prove its economic value. In fact, there
were very few demands made of the council at all and this act of ignoring may have been more integral to the BCAC choosing to include community engagement than anything coming directly from an elected official. The metaphor of the child trying to simultaneously avoid discipline and find reason for praise from a neglectful and potentially cruel parent may be the most suitable. In short, what this chapter hopes to show is that community engagement was the result of one, a near apologetic existence by a young BCAC inside a pervasive neoliberal environment and two, a genuine drive on the part of an artist constituency intent on proving its worth before its worth was questioned.

**4.1. The BCAC Origin Story – Art for Economics Sake**

In the lead up to 1991 provincial election, the BC New Democratic Party (NDP), under the leadership of Mike Harcourt, promised to commit 1% of provincial expenditures to arts and culture (Dafoe, 1995). This 1% was intended to spur and sustain a weakening provincial economy, historically reliant on resource extraction, through increased home-grown cultural activity, a model of growth that would continue to shape the province in the decades to come. While a level of 1% has never been attained in the province, and total spending by the Ministry of Community Sport and Cultural Development, in which the BCAC is housed, is forecasted to remain at just under .005% for 2018 (British Columbia Ministry of Finance, 2017), this NDP-driven acknowledgement of culture’s importance to the provincial economy led to the BC Arts Council’s (BCAC) establishment in 1995 via the four page BCAC Act. At inception, Harcourt included the new council in his larger *CultureWorks* initiative noting that the ‘new program [was] an endorsement of the importance of the arts in the province’s economic and cultural life” (Dafoe, 1995).
As part of the BCAC’s creation, arts and culture funding in the province grew to $16 million per year, an increase of $4 million from the previous BC Arts Board (ibid) – a system that in comparison had “no legislation around it” (Senior Management, 2018a). In a further endorsement of the council, and a foreshadowing of the creative economy messaging to be used by BC politicians and urban planners throughout the following decades, Harcourt continued with the economic benefit argument for the arts stating:

‘47,000’ British Columbians [were] employed in the cultural sector and it's creating jobs at twice the rate of the rest of the economy. While others cut back, my goal is to keep investing in our strengths and investing in our quality of life.” (Harcourt in Dafoe, 1995).

The first council of 15 volunteer members was heavily populated by artists including vice chair and children’s author Caroline Woodward, actors Joy Coghill and Leon Bibb, filmmaker Sandy Wilson, dancer choreographer Anna Wyman and First Nations artist Richard Hunt. 77-year-old playwright Mavor Moore was announced as the council’s inaugural chair, the first and only artist to do so. (Dafoe, 1996).

In a letter to Globe and Mail reporter Chris Dafoe, Mavor Moore concurred with Harcourt with respect to the economic benefits of artistic activity while also taking care to mix in sentiment specific to the identity forming potential of arts and culture. In his letter, penned primarily to point out an error of Dafoe’s that incorrectly quoted Moore as saying the council-members were a “lobby for the artists,” not the “arts”, Moore stated that the “arts and letters …provides creative activity for young and old, labour-intensive employment, widespread economic returns, talent banks for the media, input to the world's cultures, and perhaps our best handle on posterity” (Moore, 1996). In short,

7 BCAC lists it as 24,800 in 2018 ‘more, per capita than any other province’. (Province of British Columbia, 2018) This does not necessarily indicate a shrink but rather a trend of fluid reporting methods in the A&C sector – a ‘data gap’ that will be returned to in this chapter.
neither the head of the government nor its arts council was echoing the art for art’s sake sentiments of the cultural clerisy responsible for forming Canada’s first arts council system. The BCAC was built first and foremost to prop up the province’s economy with a lesser and secondary purpose of providing for its citizen’s social well-being—a foundation that would continue to shape the nascent organization into the 21st century.

4.2. Arm’s Length Relationship?

While the arts community welcomed both the BCAC and associated funding increase, there remained concerns about its independence from government. One of the gaps immediately noted was the lack of mechanism in the BCAC Act that would guarantee the council’s independence from ruling government. Bill Barlee, the then minister for Small Business Tourism and Culture, stated that the government was aiming “to strike a balance between independence and political accountability…. I don’t think I would go against the recommendations of the board,’ Barlee said. ‘But I might go back to them and say, this is going to come back to me in the House.” (Dafoe, 1995) As the senior management member interviewed for this project made clear, the misgivings surrounding the lack of BCAC independence continue today, “Some of the people think that the [BCAC] funding is arms-length, well it’s not. I think people can recognize that.” (Senior Management, 2018a).

Lack of independence aside, the BCAC soon ran into a more significant challenge. In 1999, four years after Harcourt christened the BCAC as a new resource for the province, the same BC NDP, now under Glen Clark, cut the Council’s allocation by 4 million dollars, returning it to pre-1995 levels. It was in this state of diminished confidence that the BCAC crept into the 21st century under the rule of the Gordon Campbell-led BC Liberal Party.
4.3. BCAC Under Gordon Campbell’s Liberals

A key to understanding how engagement became a BCAC funding priority in 2009 is that 2009 sat in the middle of a 16-year dominant run of the BC Liberals—a political run that in no small part, coincided with a number of relevant socio-economic events including, Vancouver being awarded (in 2003) and then hosting the 2010 Olympics, the 2008 worldwide economic collapse and the continued dwindling of the province’s resource sectors. In short, the operating conditions of the BCAC did not get easier as it moved out of infancy into its toddler stage inside the fiscally conservative 2000s—a reality exacerbated by the fact “Campbell was not a fan of the Arts Council and the fact that it was, and remains, the child of an NDP era—there was always a black cloud over it” (Senior Management, 2018a). Furthermore, the stated pressure for the arts to bolster the province’s economy remained, but rather than follow an NDP version of economic stability via job creation, the BCAC’s economic raison d’etre had shifted to supporting artists and their creations to serve as attractants for the international creative class and its global money.

Indicators of a shift to this international focus can be found in the evolution of goals posted by the BCAC in its Annual Reports (AR). In the 2001/02 AR the fifth goal of the BCAC was still very much in line with Harcourt’s original vision of culture as an local economic stimulant suited to “maximize the contribution of arts and cultural activity to the economic growth of the province” (British Columbia Arts Council, 2002). By 2003, two years into Liberal rule, this fifth goal was replaced in favour of a more outward looking one that ensured “markets for artists and arts and cultural organizations are developed” (British Columbia Arts Council, 2003). While there is no clear data to suggest any liberal staffer was directly pushing this evolution, it could be read as an indicator of a new culture of growth in the province, a mindset more in line with the international aspirations
of the recently awarded 2010 Olympics and growing popularity of the Richard Florida creative economy model whereby a region’s economic success depends not on who is already there but who may be convinced to come.

This global focus was definitely present in the province’s Community Tourism Program (CTP), which was launched in 2004, a program not managed by the BCAC. CTP was designed to allow local municipalities to apply directly to the provincial government “to support initiatives that included festivals, art shows, music festivals, and other cultural activities” (Low, 2017), all designed to meet the Campbell goal of doubling BC tourism by 2015. As will be seen later in this chapter, the trend towards more arts and culture funding being directly allocated by government instead of the BCAC increased to include the Cultural Olympiad focused programs such as Legacies Now, Arts Partners in Creative Development and Spirit of British Columbia Grants – programs managed and adjudicated by government staff rather than peer juries or BCAC staff. It is also worth noting how similar programs continue today under the province’s Creative Economies banner (Province of British Columbia, 2017), which is specific to supporting an international presence for the province’s artists. In short, rather than increasing in responsibility and allocation, the BCAC was at best staying stagnant under the Campbell Liberals.

4.4. Flying Under the Radar

From the perspective of Senior Management, the BCAC had very little currency within the Liberal government. “I think we received a little lift before each election⁸, maybe, but nothing really significant. We were kind of in the dark – we were kind of marginalized.” (Senior Management, 2018b) and as a result the opportunity to directly

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⁸ According to media, the posted BCAC budget lift was 3 million in 2005.
allocate more funds to BC artists wasn't increasing – a relegation due to a “fly under the radar” (ibid) approach to government employed by the both the BCAC’s staff and council chairs, coupled with a general lack of hard evidence to establish the council’s worth. “In those days [BCAC policy] wasn't led by government at all” (ibid), and one of the reasons may have been a lack of data with which to make a case for attention. “The only thing we could come up with was the basic data of how many grants we gave… how many communities we touched. It was about the real province… about caucus.” (ibid).

To summarize, the lack of responsibility or mandate handed down to the BCAC by government makes it difficult to point to any obvious encroachment or neoliberal agenda as leading to community engagement’s inclusion as a priority in 2009. As senior management states:

“I do think we were trying to capture something in 2008/2009 which was about acknowledging the various roles that are played in community maybe, but [community engagement] was certainly not driven by the Gordon Campbell liberals.” (Senior Management, 2018b)

From the data collected it appears that the inclusion of community engagement as funding priority was more an internal attempt to establish relevancy for a generally ignored arts council and a certain community of artists already interested in social impact.

4.5. A Sense of Relevancy

From inception the BCAC existed in a state of identity crisis, hampered by its economic stimulant origins and an increasing irrelevance as the Olympics approached. This reality was then exacerbated by its continued operation under a disinterested government and an inability to find a common language to explain its value. “If you read about the 2010 Arts and Sports Legacy… it didn't include the arts at all. So, we could
start adopting some of that language about the creative economy but it always seemed, not distasteful but, it was a stretch...” (ibid). Irrespective of Harcourt’s original aspirations, it was clear that the arts, particularly those directly funded by the BCAC (i.e. not the more lucrative film and television industries) would not replace the jobs or tax dollars previously generated by the resource sector. Discussions concerning the economic multipliers of arts and culture funding were not taken seriously, “I know my colleagues that work in treasury board just dismiss it” (Senior Management, 2018a). The same could and still can be said for the arts and culture work force employed in the province. “They know it’s not generating the kind of jobs that the forest sector or mining did 20 years ago.” (ibid) So when artist lobby organizations like the Alliance for Arts and Culture make the case for increased funding based on the fact that BC still has the highest per capita number of artists working in any province and then attempt to strengthen that polemic by pointing out the average earnings of the BC artists as some of the lowest in the country (Leadley, 2016), government just responds with, “Why would we want to generate low paying jobs? We can do that in the service sector, we can do that in tourism, but why particularly would you do it in this area.” (Senior Management, 2018a)

With the economic stimulant rationale for funding the arts falling on deaf ears, the BC Liberal government independently taking on culture as global attractor for its metropolitan regions, the BCAC’s leadership maintaining a practice of keeping its head down and then having no useful data to show when they brought their head up, there was little left for the BCAC to point to as its purpose. As senior management puts it, there was a need for proof of worth and, “maybe it was around relevancy. It certainly seemed urgent.” (Senior Management, 2018b)
4.6. Community Engagement’s Rise

The use of the word engagement in policy (and business and sport and everywhere else it seems) has become so ubiquitous that it has pretty much lost its currency, “It’s becoming a meaningless word almost” (Senior Management, 2018a). However, there was a time when the word was still emerging as an effective tool for policy makers intent on explaining how intents, purposes and interested actors might intersect within a diversifying society. Tracking the frequency and manner with which engagement is used in the BCAC annual reports provides a telling shape to its rise as a funding priority at the council.

In its 2001/02 Annual Report BCAC used engagement twice to refer to the regional presence of artists across the province, specifically, “The level of engagement has been defined as the number of professionals from each region that are included in the awards process” (British Columbia Arts Council, 2002). This remained consistent in its four uses in the 2003 report, save for the one time engagement refers to the cultural diversity of communities – “The BC Arts Council is committed to promoting the
engagement of diverse communities and recognizing different cultural traditions.” (British Columbia Arts Council, 2003) In 2004 engagement’s usage jumps up to 12 but is once again specific to artists except for a highlighted Pacific Cinematheque project entitled Documenting Engagement, “that explored the use of digital video as a means of documenting arts based community development” (British Columbia Arts Council, 2004, 6), the first use of the term that aligns with the model to come. Following a near retirement of the term in 2006/07 where again it is used only twice in reference to the regional representation of artists (British Columbia Arts Council, 2007, 16, 42) it experiences its biggest shift and essential re-definition in 2007/08 when it appears 10 times (British Columbia Arts Council, 2008) and in a variety of new contexts including: “government’s enhanced engagement with the creative sector” (10); “The increasing engagement with the global arts community…” (31); “…strategic planning and the engagement of community members in the consultation process’ (31); “to broaden the engagement of residents in community based artistic and cultural activities.” (41); etc. The original usage of engagement to explain the regional representation of artist is now relegated to two footnotes.

According to Senior Management, the establishment of community engagement inside of the BCAC’s policy vernacular was in part sparked by the management consultancy firm Ference Weicker. In 2005/06 Ference Weicker was tasked by the BCAC with determining what the landscape was like for music and theatre in the province and “if the [BCAC] programs were having any impact” (Senior Management, 2018a). As part of the study the BCAC “took our existing application forms and guidelines, sat down with groups of artists in different disciplines and got them to help us ask questions that the jury wants answered when assessing grant applications and awarding funding.” (ibid)
What emerged was a cross-disciplinary interest in having artists articulate who they imagined to be serving in their work – an articulation that stretched beyond standard audience numbers or *bums in seats* measurement. It was out of this line of inquiry that community engagement began to find its footing as a potential third measurable alongside the previously tracked values of artistic excellence (soon to become artistic achievement) and organizational stability.

### 4.7. Interdisciplinary Influences on Engagement’s Rise

When considering the relationship of theatre practice to the shifts in BCAC funding priorities it is important to recognize that theatre is not the only discipline subsidized by the council. In addition to theatre, the BCAC also has the responsibility of supporting dance, media arts, publishing, literary arts, creative writing, performance art, music, museums, community-engaged arts\(^9\), visual arts, arts administration, arts training and the sustainability of not-for-profit cultural and artistic enterprises (British Columbia Arts Council, 2009a). Add to this breadth of purpose the opinions of the variety of individuals chosen to sit on the council itself and it is easy to imagine how theatre specific concerns might be enveloped and perhaps neglected inside the larger needs of the larger arts community. Not unlike the peer jury system through which much of the BCAC funding is awarded, a consultative process can be dominated by louder voices

\(^9\) It is worth noting that there is a separate stream of community based art practice at the BCAC, one that is specifically supports “projects that develop and extend the practice and understanding of arts-based community development through the processes of creating new work, producing events; and developing resource materials for arts-based community development practitioners.” (British Columbia Arts Council, n/d) This study is more interested in how this practice has wound its way into the traditionally non-community-based realm of art making

This study is more interested in how this practice has wound its way into the traditionally non-community-based realm of art making
with specific agendas. When asked to recall the artist community consultations exploring
the new engagement priorities at council the interviewee remembered:

“There were some pretty strong voices that wanted us to dig deeper than
the tricky thing around artistic excellence, which is problematic, but really
wanted us to encourage activity that was more around social justice … to
provide incentives for that type of stuff” (Senior Management, 2018a).

According to management these louder voices often came from the artist run-
centres and art as social practice realms, both of which have more extensive histories of
working on “all sorts of gnarly social problems” (ibid), practices that speak more directly
to community concerns, and indeed, the social relevancy of art practice as a whole. In
the following chapter it will be shown these same concerns around social practice were
not as rooted, either practically or intellectually, in the theatre making of the large
majority of Progress Lab companies.

Thus, the specific needs and desires of every artist or even groupings of artist by
discipline cannot hope to be met in a system that purports to support the arts and culture
milieu as a whole. This difficulty is exacerbated by the fact the BCAC had been unable to
provide clear measurables to prove that the art being made was at all useful –
aesthetically, socially or otherwise – to BC’s evolving populations. In the end, the
conclusion arrived by BCAC staff was that the impact a program or artist may have on a
given community might be more measurable than what is subjectively recognized as
good art. “There was a decision that at a certain point we stopped evaluating artistic
excellence and we started evaluating artistic achievement. That was to try and move
away from Eurocentric views of excellence.” (Senior Management, 2018b)
4.8. Access – Problem of BCAC Over Funding Dominant Organizations

The larger “Eurocentric” institutions, the work they program and the models in which they work are very much a holdover from the art for art’s sake funding rationale supported by the originators of Canada’s arts council system. This regionally based model sought to culturally develop a nation as a whole with large local institutions, be they theatre, ballet, opera etc., producing work deemed representative of the population. As Canadian cities continue to grow and diversify this mode of cultural dissemination has proven archaic and continues to fail as a result. One need only look at the final 2012 season of Vancouver’s Playhouse as proof of homogeneity in programming: a cultural white-wash of the Tosca Café (ballet infused theatre piece celebrating a San Francisco cafe), La Cage Aux Folles (mildly subversive gay content), Red (Mark Rothko biopic), a musical version of the Hunchback from Notre Dame, and God of Carnage (upper middle-class Manhattan struggle).

Clear proof of a similarly historical bias towards larger, more dominant and homogenous voices by the BCAC is illustrated in the percentage of funds it distributed to the province’s largest theatre companies in comparison to their smaller operating counterparts. According to the BCAC’s 2008 annual report, of the 24 theatre companies receiving operating funding, the five largest received 60% of the available funds. What may be more telling is that these same 5 large organizations received just over half of all the available funding for both the 24 operating theatre companies and 34 independent theatre projects combined (British Columbia Arts Council, 2008).

By including community engagement as a priority in its upcoming 2009 strategic plan, the BCAC hoped to address this historic imbalance of access to funding for artists working within underrepresented modes of creation or marginalized groups. “One of the
constant tensions of the arts council is the high percentage of art dollars that go to some of the larger institutions... How do you make sure that new work with new voices has half a chance to build resources?" (Senior Management, 2018b)

“Community engagement was a way that said if you are active in addressing the needs of your community beyond the number of people in the seats that we will value that as well.” (Senior Management, 2018a) Even though Senior Management was ultimately not satisfied with level of redress, “in the end we never addressed the actual historical imbalance” (ibid), Figure 3 demonstrates that the effort was in part successful. While funding for the larger organizations has continued to increase\(^\text{10}\), it now lands equal to the other 29 theatre organizations receiving operating funds in the province. What’s more is there has been a significant increase in the amount of dollars being awarded to the projects realm which theoretically is where one might find new independent voices exploring new material and ways of working.

\(^{10}\) The Vancouver Playhouse folded in 2012. Its spot has been taken by the Vancouver East Cultural Centre, an organization showing a much deeper committed to diverse voices and modes of creation. Of the 25 shows programmed for the 2018/19 season, five feature culturally diverse creators, two others are developed by indigenous artists and two more feature disabled protagonists. Their Femme Fatale series, “highlighting the strength and power of female-identifying voices” includes another three works. This equals just under 50% of their season being committed to what could be considered marginalized voices.
To return to the re-phrased research question that now asks how engagement emerged as a priority in the 2009 strategic plan, the answer is multi-faceted. The data collected points to a fringe existence on the part of the council, a state that lead to a program evaluation, artist consultations and a genuine desire to increase access for underrepresented voices. As Senior Management points out, once the consideration of community engagement’s value began, it remained central to the conversation “until it became part of the [2009-2013] strategic plan that we developed” (Senior Management, 2018a).

When the goal of community engagement first appeared in the 2009 strategic plan, it had yet to find the wide-ranging social aspirations it would by the following 2014 version. In this first iteration the goal was primarily focused on supporting arts advocacy with various stakeholders across the province, with the specific aims to:

1. “Strengthen community engagement within the arts and cultural communities;

2. Build awareness of the scope, diversity and excellence of B.C.’s arts and culture;
3. Strengthen the Council's profile across B.C.;

4. Strengthen relationships between Council and all levels of government."

(British Columbia Arts Council, 2009a)

Rather than suggesting bold new avenues for community and creativity to intersect as it would five years later, community engagement still aimed to advocate for existing creative practice. It was essentially a soft approach and that may have been due to the crisis of faith the BCAC found itself in at the very moment the 2009 plan was released.

4.9. A Rough Landing for Community Engagement

The 2009-2013 strategic plan arrived during what was the most tumultuous time the BCAC had experienced in its 13 years of existence. Until this point the agency had successfully maintained its ‘fly under the radar approach’ to intergovernmental affairs, and “that was [also] true of all the board chairs that we had as well, until Jane Danzo” (Senior Management, 2018b).

As its previous vice-chair, Danzo had helped develop the BCAC plan, inclusive of community engagement. Now as its new chair, she was handed a series of funding cuts announced in the 2009 Liberal budget – cuts that, regardless of metrics employed, were massive. Then NDP culture critic Spencer Herbert calculated the reduction at 92%, a measure that included a similar move at the province’s Gaming Policy and Enforcement Branch to suddenly stop funding organizations producing work for adult audiences (Campbell, 2009). More conservative sources put the cuts only slightly lower at 88%, a decrease of over $17 million from $19.5 to $2.25 million (ibid, Lederman, 2010). To put this in further perspective, $2.25 million was approximately 1/6th of the funding allocated
to the BC Arts Board in 1995 before the BCAC was established. Regardless of percentage points, the fact these cuts were put in place simultaneously with the announcement of a series of new funding programs directly controlled by government point to a clear attempt on the part of the Liberals to erase any semblance of an arm’s length relationship to the province’s artists. Whereas the BCAC had until this point survived, and in fact evolved, as a result of being ignored it was now under a spotlight and spinning.

Evidence of a new intergovernmental relationship is immediately apparent on the front cover of the new 27-page\textsuperscript{11} strategic plan. Where previous BCAC document cover pages described the BCAC as \textit{Supported} by the Province of BC, the new sub-heading \textit{“An Agency of The Province of British Columbia”} (British Columbia Arts Council, 2009a) appeared for the first time. Moving into the report itself, Danzo as newly appointed Chair, uses her opening statement, which Senior Management assures was “not written by Jane” but “a really great communications guy” the government had working for them, to lean heavily on both the economic and social importance of the arts in BC.

“These are demanding times for arts and culture in BC. They are demanding because today’s uncertain financial climate requires all of us to be creative and to find innovative ways of working. At the same time, the nature of the arts is changing; forms of creation, methods of distribution, the way artists and audiences participate – all are evolving.

Meanwhile, there is a fundamental change underway in how arts and culture are perceived by public policy makers and the public at large. The arts, which in the past have been considered non-essential, are now being seen as a vital contributor to a healthy society, an essential element of the new knowledge-based creative economy.” (British Columbia Arts Council, 2009a)

\textsuperscript{11} In comparison, the 2014 plan that followed was only 8 pages - perhaps there was less to explain.
On page 2, Kevin Kreuger, B.C.’s minister of Tourism, Culture and The Arts recognizes that “this has been a tough year for artists and arts organizations across the province” but assures the reader that “the Province is committed to the long-term health of B.C.’s arts sector and recognizes the key social and economic roles that heritage, arts and culture play in our society” (ibid). He continues his statement to celebrate three new funding programs the province is committing to over the next period. The first, the B.C.150 Cultural Fund, is a $150 million permanent endowment expected to raise $8 million in dividends per year for arts funding, a fund that “won't go directly to the B.C. Arts Council”, although they will be expected to “advise government on how this money can best be used” (Wyman, 2008). The second, entitled The Renaissance Fund is another endowment matching program to be housed by the BCAC but managed by the Vancouver Foundation (British Columbia Arts Council, 2009c). The third is the Arts Partners in Creative Development (Province of British Columbia, n.d.), a program which has no BCAC input whatsoever – all curious programs to be highlighting in a strategic plan meant to chart the future of BCAC funding.

In the spring of 2010, as these cuts were passed on to the artists, some of whom faced considerable, and in some cases, complete cuts to their base operating funding, Kevin Krueger announced the establishment of an additional $30 million Arts Legacy Fund that would be managed by, once again, by BC government, not the BCAC (Smith, 2010). Adding insult to injury, Jane Danzo claimed the board had only learned of the new fund on budget day forcing them to remain "awkwardly silent", until the government released more information, "I would have expected that somehow or other the board would have been given a heads up" (Danzo in ibid). A letter from Kreuger was sent later that summer containing more information including the fact that the B.C. Arts Council’s annual operating clients “could only access the remaining Legacy funds if they met
certain goals of the government and its Legacy idea” (Smith, 2010). The encroachment that seemed absent in the lead up to community engagements arrival was now more than present.

Citing an impossibility to advocate and support arts and culture because the BCAC Board’s “relationship to government is not at-arms–length, (Danzo, 2010) Jane Danzo announced that, “with respect and with regret, [she] felt obliged to resign [from the BCAC board] in order to have a voice.” (ibid), making her, by far, the shortest sitting chair in the BCAC’s history.

Therefore, the BCAC 2009-2013 strategic plan, complete with its new priority of community engagement, arrived within a maelstrom of intergovernmental conflict and crisis for the BCAC – a crisis that could be read not just an encroachment into BCAC matters but a near annihilation of the agency altogether. How these impending cuts or developing attitudes to the BCAC may have led to the inclusion of community engagement is not clear, however it could be assumed there must have been some sense on the part of the BCAC to step up and prove the council’s worth to both its community and ruling government.

4.10. Conclusion

As I hope has been illustrated, the prioritizing of community engagement at the BCAC arose as the result of myriad factors, both internal and external, beginning with the agency’s blue-collar origins. Community engagement came out of a desire on the part of council and its board to ask its funded artists to consider their impact on society and a reciprocal pressure on the part of some of its artists for the council to do the same. Its arrival could also be seen as an outcome of an ongoing shift in how arts and culture was expected to serve a 21st century population. Finally, its arrival was the product of an
unsettlingly distant and then aggressively present provincial government interested in directly controlling the cultural output and image of the province. Working as a whole these influences resulted in what the interviewee concluded, “that [the BCAC] was not all about supporting professional individual artists [but also] a broader social impact... in the way it's changing British Columbia.” (Senior Management, 2018a)

How the inclusion of community engagement as a funding priority and the associated funding turmoil that accompanied it went on to impact the programming choices of Progress Lab will be the focus of the next two chapters.
Chapter 5. Impacts

This chapter explores material specific to the second half of the research question, which asks how the inclusion of community engagement as a funding priority has impacted the programming choices of Progress Lab (PL). To complete this analysis, I rely on data collected through a two-hour focus group conversation with individuals representing eight of the twelve PL companies and case studies of three of the same. The case studies were comprised of hour-long interviews with the leadership of each of the three companies combined with an analysis of their respective financial and statistical information from 2008 to the present.

The data collected reveals a range of responses to the prioritizing of community engagement, most of which are influenced by increased competition in the sector, varying degrees of organizational precarity and differing capacities to make the concept of community engagement work to an organization’s advantage. Of the three case studies, one organization was very well positioned to embrace the priority at a philosophical and perhaps more importantly, considering their status as an operating organization, administrative level. The other two organizations, reliant as they were on project funding, lacked the same organizational stability at the point of the priority’s introduction and as a result suffered in the implementation of community engagement – regardless of intent or appearance of priority alignment. What this suggests, in part, is that organizations already experiencing traditionally recognizable organizational structures continue to thrive under new priorities, while other less established organizations stagnate or stumble. The question of how this may have positively and negatively impacted the creative capacity of the artists, the quality and diversity of art
being made and the public experience of culture will conclude the study in a section covering the losses and gains as reported by the individual artists themselves.

Considering that all of the organizations making up Progress Lab rely on the BCAC for continued funding, efforts to preserve the anonymities of organization and individual remains a condition of this work. This was promised to encourage as frank a discussion as possible within the focus group and case study interviews. The challenge in reporting, particularly when combining the experiences of organizations chosen for their diverse experience, comes with ensuring the reader can keep one organization or artist separate from the other. To this end, I’ve assigned the following pseudonyms to the companies and individuals being case studied, On the Ground Theatre (Sam and Julie), Mobile Theatre (Sunny) and Theatre at Large (William). When quoting the focus group participants, a generic (Focus Group, 2018) will be used as a reference. When citing short dialogs from the focus group, participants will be cited as A, B, C etc.

As a precursor to the analysis I would like to consider a marked difference in tone between the focus group and interviews. When assembled as a group, the participants expressed a definite uniformity in their exhibited attitudes towards community engagement, often moving into an adversarial or us/artist vs them/funder stance, something less apparent in the one on one interviews.

This aligning of perspective, often occurring when a peer group gathers under circumstances related to their shared profession, is an effect scholar Donald Brenneis labels as a normalizing of perspective (Brenneis, 1994). Where Brenneis found that academics learned “with striking rapidity to do bureaucratic things” (33) when assessing research funding applications, I found a similar group movement amongst the artists gathered in the focus group toward a performance of ‘gang of outsiders’ within the
funder/funded paradigm. While I accept that each and every one of the artists at that table felt they could be funded better, this stance resulted in very few positive interpretations of community engagement as a government led priority. The question of whether these individuals lacked positive examples of community engagement programming or, alternatively, were keeping those examples close to their chest brings up a number of curiosities. The collective disgruntlement in response to the community engaged programs that emerged post 2009 aligns with Scott’s research that points to the struggle with mission drift, organizational volatility, increased reporting etc. associated with project specific as opposed to operational funding. Alternatively, a reticence to discuss any positive strategies or approaches could suggest a growing, and strategic, competition impacting the collective behavior of artists within associations like PL. Both perspectives will be relevant to an upcoming area of analysis surrounding peer juries.

Another theme that continues throughout the following is the ongoing and fraught relationship artists and organizations have to defining community engagement for themselves. This core gap has led to consistent confusion inside the membership of Progress Lab as artists and organizations attempted to attend to a public priority that they were asked to personally define.

The fact that community engagement arrived at a moment of peak precarity for the artists of B.C. and the BCAC also remains essential to this analysis. For many at the focus group, the funding and, by association, self-perceived legitimacy, of their individual organizations faced significant threat with the funding cuts of 2009, the same moment that community engagement was rolled out. The programing of engaged works by any definition exploded and, as will be shown via the case studies, the organizational and
creative capacities for those operating without core funding were stretched as a story of haves and have-nots began to emerge.

5.1. Focus Group Findings: The Timeline

The two-hour focus group was split into two sections, with the first hour dedicated to building a collaborative timeline of the 2000 – 2016 period specific to individual company operations (see Figures 1 and 2). The participants were instructed to delineate organizational activity using black sharpies for programming deemed traditional and red for activities they considered engagement driven. If the participants were unsure of the designation they were asked to write the program in black and then circle it in red. Blue sharpies were also used for geo-political, personal, career related and other events they considered relevant to the relationship of engagement to programming choices. What emerged was an explosion of red marker programming appearing midway through the timeline, a picture of just how much the 2009 insertion of engagement impacted and shaped PL’s programming as a whole.
Figure 3: Progress Lab Program Timeline 2000-2016, 2016 is at the bottom.
There are some factors beyond the core focus of this research to consider when looking at the above image and chart figure, the first being that three of the twelve PL organizations were founded in and around 2003 which in part explains the jump in traditional programming in the years following. A number of companies in PL also experienced significant growth during the 2000s, with some attaining operating status, touring opportunities etc., which helps explain the increase in the overall number of programs. The formation of Progress Lab itself and its first collective producing venture in 2006, *Hive 1* is also worth noting as an increase in activity that otherwise may not have occurred. With all that in mind, two key findings present in the chart remain directly pertinent to this study, the relative lack of engagement specific activities occurring within PL pre-2009 and the sharp increase in engagement programming following the priority’s arrival. A third item worth noting is the confluence of dips and surges occurring in 2014, simultaneous with the completion of the BCAC strategic plan that first introduced community engagement to BC’s artists. This third area will be given further attention in the case study theme entitled Priority Exhaustion.

*Figure 4: Graph representation of above PL Programming Timeline.*
5.2. Lack of Clear Engagement Programming Prior to 2009

In the previous chapter exploring how engagement arose as a priority at the BCAC, Senior Management attributed substantial credit to the developing interests and desires of the artists being funded by the Council. There was, however, some question as to whether engagement’s insertion was responding to the wishes of the theatre discipline in particular. Based on the timelined recollections of the Progress Lab organizations, there were a total of nine programs determined to be engagement driven prior to 2009, seven of which were a hybrid of engagement and traditional programming activities. Where a total of sixteen engagement or near to engagement programs might suggest an inherent interest in community engagement as a practice, it is worth noting the types of activities listed and how they are being categorized. Of the sixteen, four were education programs specific to the theatre community, two were audience building initiatives, five were small festivals of work produced by companies, one was the initial meeting of Progress Lab and one was a theatre piece modified and performed in the Vancouver Art Gallery. This leaves only three activities, a public workshop on video projection, a workshop with a local activist group and a touring work focused on teen sexual health that could be defined, or close to defined, as engagement in a purist sense of “with, by, and for” a specific community.

5.2.1. With, By, and For as a Measure of Engagement

The BCAC’s reluctance to define community engagement remains a frustration for the artists and organizations of PL. This reality is not lost on Senior Management who recognizes one of the core weaknesses of the priority as being “we always say you define it yourself and you'll know if you achieved it.” (Senior Management, 2018b) As expressed by the use of “backpedaling” in the following statement, the ability to self-
define engagement, initially designed to expand rather than restrict creative impulse, has proven as challenging as liberating. “I phoned (name withheld) at the Council and asked what do you mean by community, and they kind of backpedaled and said we leave that to you to decide what that means” (PL Focus Group, 2018). The following back and forth that followed this statement demonstrates the shared confusion;

A: Well my community is my audience. Can my community actually be my audience? That is not good enough. So, I felt a little shortchanged in my seeking the definition of what they mean by community. And I’m still not satisfied with what that means. Because we do a lot of work with the emerging community. I feel like they're talking about non-artists but are not saying that.

B: And why should we all be so atomized and be reductionist in our definition of community anyway?

C: Doesn't it come down to people who otherwise wouldn't be engaged by the work that you do?

A: Are they talking about non-theatregoers? As a theatre company how do you engage with people who do not go to the theatre? Is that the question?

D: Most of what we have ever done has been about people working in this [theatre]community

A: There feels like there is a trend against that. They don't want us to make art for artists.

E: I always thought it meant people in need, the disadvantaged. You have to do something to support those in need.

The concept of supporting “those in need” lands closest to what could be described as pure engagement, a practice that begins to incorporate the more grassroots participatory practice of community arts, a body of work that two of the three case studies, On the Ground (OtG) and Mobile Theatre (MT) took up in the years
following engagement’s arrival. Julie, a past artistic director of OtG and leader of its community-engaged programs, described community arts as “with, by, and for a community - a community that defines itself as a community and art that comes out of a community need” (PL Focus Group, 2018). She went on to differentiate this practice from quasi-engaged works by noting it is more than “an artist coming in and saying I have an idea will you all come and make this with me”. The three elements of with, by and for, while strict in combination, provide a tool with which to measure the degree of engagement inside a project.

To illustrate, I will use one of the programs included in the timeline, a partnership between one of the case study organizations, Theatre at Large (TaL) and a local activist organization I will call Refugee Rights Now (RRN). RRN asked TaL to help them develop more effective demonstration tactics. TaL sought and received Canada Council Artist and Community Collaboration funding to work with the activist group – which, incidentally, caused some turmoil between the artist and the quasi-anarchist organization who normally rejects government sanctioned support. Artist led workshops were held with members of RRN, protest strategies were devised by the members of the group and those tactics were then used in future protests for the benefit of their specific community of stakeholders. The with, by, and fors of the initiative are clear, as is the potential for impact within that specific group. Whether or not the resulting tactics were engaging for an outside audience is less of a concern.

This three-pronged test of with, by and for is useful in decoding just how engaged a program is. Take a theatre education workshop involving an international teacher and the local community of artists as an example. The with (theatre community), by (theatre community), and for (theatre community) holds up – it just feels a little insular with respect to the thornier social issues community engagement may have hoped to
address. A talk back with an audience after a theatre performance is an example of a more challenged sense of engagement as the stakeholders start to separate from themselves: the with is the artists involved, the by is the also artist but the for is the audience. Any wider social impact on a specific and motivated stakeholder group becomes less defined, difficult to measure and as a result harder to make sense of under the heading of community engagement.

5.2.2. Audience Development as Engagement

An underlying need to attract, satisfy and retain audiences drove how many of the PL companies defined engagement in the lead up to and following the 2009 shift. This type of community engagement made up a large portion of what they deemed to be community engaged practice post 2009 and points to an increase in competition for the public’s attention in an urban setting like Vancouver. Large audiences for small organizations indicate success via increased revenues and assumed popular success. This in turn leads to a sense of relevancy – if people come to the show you have used their tax dollars to create, there is an assumed value. As a result, the self-framing of audience development as engagement was consistent throughout the conversation, something Julie noted as also occurring in the United States, “Audience development – community engagement confusion has been a huge… ‘Oh community engagement, that's because we’re losing subscribers. We need to engage people who can fill the seats.’ That becomes the whole thing” (Julie in Focus Group, 2018). Along these very lines, a focus group participant offered an example of what they believed was a legitimate community engagement initiative involving the Downtown Eastside (DTES).

The PL organization made an application to a local foundation to assist them in placing performance in DTES spaces (storefronts etc.) not normally considered theatre
spaces. The goal of the project was to attract local residents to the work, residents who may have normally been “uncomfortable with the formality of the traditional theatre and its protocols” (Progress Lab, 2018). The measure of with, by, and for is useful here. The proposed initiative or work involved was not with the community the organization was trying to attract. Nor was it by, as the company was offering work written rehearsed and performed by professionals. The box that gets ticked was the for category. However, the question of whether the for was to fill houses or do a greater community good is not clear. Community minded or not, the funding request was denied due to concerns the foundation’s advisory committee had around the gentrification of these non-traditional spaces the company hoped to fill with professional theatre, a frustrating result for an organization whose offices are located in the DTES.  

5.2.3. Artistry Under the Society Act: Who Do You Serve?

The fact that each of the PL organizations operates as an official society under the rules and regulations of the Society Act of BC came up as a point of consideration. For context, in order to access any kind of consistent public funding or achieve charitable status with the Canadian Revenue Agency, which then allows for other corporate, foundation or individual donation revenue streams, arts organizations must develop and register a constitution with the province that is in support of a greater public good. Additionally, they must also adhere to a system of public reporting and remain accountable to the public through its board of directors who theoretically could relieve the artistic leadership of their positions regardless of if they founded the organization or

12 The question of artists serving as the shock troops of gentrification”, a term used by UK ceramics artist Grayson Perry (Ball, 2016), and how this might be tied to multiple examples of recent community engagement efforts is undoubtedly relevant to this conversation but beyond the scope of the present work.
It is only in exchange of these requirements that arts organizations remain eligible for the majority of public funding, a relationship that, one, could lead to a standardization of output as will be explored further in the case studies, and, two, frustrates many in the focus group who see organizational accountability as being in conflict with creative impulse;

A: They are putting the criteria around community engagement to the companies, not to individual artists, right? All of us see ourselves as artists running companies.

B: So, the responsibility lands with more of an organizational structure.

C: I think that's how they see it as confused. We do both.

(PL Focus Group, 2018)

The primary reasons the society system was developed was to ensure that publicly supported organizations did not unfairly compete with the private sector while also remaining accountable to the public. A board of directors, by attending meetings, approving budgets and expenditures and signing off on annual financial statements etc., are theoretically meant to guarantee that an organization adheres to these objectives. Based on the conversations had and data collected, there is little reason to believe this is a driving concern at the smaller independent company level, a fact that is not lost on the BCAC staff, “I think we still ask for a letter from the [Board] Chair that we mostly know the general manager or ED writes right?” (Senior Management, 2018a).

13 There are a number of ‘theocratics’ at play here. Most boards are originally assembled of friends and family and in the case of smaller organizations, board responsibility is limited to signing documents and minor fundraising activities – aka the ‘Paper Board’ phenomena. Over time and as result of increased activity and/or board demand, boards can become more involved and vocal and in some cases grow to dictate practice. Also worth noting is how an organization represents or mis-represents itself and its membership has been a concern for funders, particularly BC Gaming, in the past.
This confusion in accountability and purpose extends to the juries tasked with measuring the legitimacy and effectiveness of an organization’s governance, “There are a number of things that are problematic in the evaluation, things like, how do you decide whether an organization is well governed right? (Senior Management, 2018a). This muddiness in accountability and how or when a jury calls an organization to task for their public impact helps “to understand the sort of spectrum the council is considering as part of community engagement and how to evaluate when somebody is excelling at it and when somebody is just mimicking it” (Ibid).

Questions specific to organizational responsibility and whether anyone is paying a consistent enough level of attention to inform programming choices came up in the focus group conversation. This line of inquiry extended to concerns around how juries and the council itself might measure organizational impacts beyond audience numbers or surpluses and deficits. In short, the split purpose of art making vs. social impact remains an issue.

**B:** One of the primary responsibilities of the artist is to ask questions, to raise questions, and that doesn’t comply with working towards a preconceived answer.

**C:** Like reducing bullying in schools by 15%.

**A:** Or providing meals to street kids.

(PL Focus Group, 2018)

Tailoring artistic practice to meet a society's purpose also brought into question the available skills of the leaders. While it is possible that the constitutions of their organizations might have the language to suggest grander social purpose, many of the companies of Progress Lab were formed to make theatre, not address the “thornier
issues of the day” (Senior Management, 2018a) or at minimum, the artists collected hope to address them through less obvious and more artful ways. “They are now asking us to suddenly become social workers. But we’re not social workers we are artists. It is out of our field” (PL Focus Group, 2018).

This lack of social purpose or attachment to a specific community hindered the companies of PL when developing community engagement activities in their funding requests subsequent to 2009, a complication, one focus group participant, did not imagine manifesting for other organizations built on clearer, but “silooed” social agendas;

B: VACT (Vancouver Asian-Canadian Theatre\textsuperscript{14}) came out of a community, RealWheels ("produces performances that deepen the audiences’ understanding of the disability experience"\textsuperscript{15}), came out of the community. Frank ("committed to the development of queer and genderqueer artists and actively inclusive of all gender identities, sexualities and ethnicities"\textsuperscript{16}) came out of a community. But I think that's not healthy. Everybody's in a little community silo and don't step back and look at the big world and speak about it.”

5.2.4. Dwindling Audiences

How much mileage is there in stepping back and looking at the “big world” if that same big world is not looking back? According to the attendance statistics collected from the three case studies, the big world may no longer be a realistic target for Progress Lab organizations.

\textsuperscript{14} http://www.vact.ca/
\textsuperscript{15} http://realwheels.ca/house-lights-on-realwheels/our-mission-and-history/
\textsuperscript{16} http://thefranktheatre.com/about/
Based on the above figure, is it delusional for artists to imagine their purpose as speaking to the world at large as local audiences shrink? With community engagement, the BCAC may simply be pushing its theatre artists towards a new specified relevancy as opposed to continuing down a path that, for most, has them satisfying less and less people.

This notion of audience numbers as measure of relevancy is a core consideration, particularly when considering theatre practice. Whether it was Aristotle equating relevance with educational impact, Plato seeing little to no epistemological value in a creative product or Kant suggesting art need not be relevant to anything but itself, each was dependent on the core artist-audience relationship to complete their assessment. This audience-based sense of relevancy and associated desire to attract the larger public to creative product continues to be true of the many companies at Progress Lab, who when asked to increase their engagement activities in 2009 began programming increased audience development activities via free ticket programs or facilitated audience discussions. As many stated in the focus group conversation – they felt their audiences were their communities.
If a purer community engaged practice asks that an artist attend to a specific community rather than the public at large, that should naturally result in a deeper impact on a smaller amount of people, but also a coinciding decrease in attendance numbers. While it is possible to argue, using the figure above, that as audiences continue to decrease for the three companies, the resiliency of those communities they engage with is increased. Unfortunately for the purposes of data collection, impact is much more difficult to measure, graph or advertise than the number of tickets sold.

5.2.5. Engagement Post 2009

As the timeline data shows, the companies of Progress Lab responded to community engagement as a priority with increased programming, which is not a surprise considering the precarious funding environment many of them found themselves in. The number of engagement driven activities (written in red) went from one in 2009 to seven in 2010, ultimately peaking at eleven in 2014 alone – two more than had been programmed in total between 2000 and 2009. Hybrid programming (black circled in red) followed a similar trajectory jumping from one in 2009 to six the following year. As another more comprehensive comparison, where there was a total of sixteen company designated engagement or near-engagement activities reported between 2000 and 2009, there was a full 81 between 2009 and 2016. The priority had its impact in programming choices, or at least in how the artists were now reporting them;

A: I feel that in some way we've gotten a bit better at noticing [community engagement] retroactively rather than thinking about it. Like – we program something and I try to find community engagement… Oh yes were doing that thing here, let's put that in the grant.

B: For us, it compelled us to start adding workshop components as part of the creation, where we would engage members of the community and even get them into making elements of the show… which was part of our deal to be there.” (PL Focus Group, 2018)
While the numbers of activities jumped significantly, programming also began finding clearer purpose with respect to who the programs were *for*. However, rather than looking out towards distinct communities, a number of organizations continued focusing their engagement work inwards towards its own community of artists. There was a distinct increase in artist conversation events, wherein artists would speak to other artists about their careers or processes; professional development programming and mentorship programs geared towards younger artists beginning their careers; and artist showcases and/or mini-festivals. The opportunity to self-define community engagement was leading to self-preservation;

C: I think the important thing when you’re faced with that question of the 25% (the value of engagement in funding assessments), is to hold your ground as an artist and the art that you believe in and are interested in. To try to make it work for you without shifting into some tokenistic thing… I think it’s a good reminder.

Along the same lines, another group participant concerned with “shifting the artform towards a social agenda” (PL Focus Group, 2018) referred to feedback his organization received regarding a peer assessed operating application made to the BCAC;

**D:** We were told in the past that our mission wasn’t specific enough.

**C:** And you made adjustments?

**D:** We tried but I did not go down that road of being a very specific socially driven company. I made a conscious choice.
5.2.6. Soft Nudge or Heavy Hand?

For many at the focus group table, the inclusion of community engagement as a funding priority alongside artistic achievement and organizational capacity felt a step beyond what they considered to be the purview of the BCAC. One participant went so far as to liken it to “the socialist realism in the former Soviet Union. It's not quite as extreme, but that is its function, a social function. It's the same impulse.”

While aligning the BCAC’s interest in encouraging community engagement practices to Stalinist cultural policy may appear extreme it is not completely off the mark. “There is part of it, simply put, that is about behavioral modification. It's about asking questions that make artists and managers think maybe we should be looking at [deeper engagement]” (Senior Management, 2018a). To this point, Senior Management brought up one of the larger theatre institutions working in the province and how the BCAC’s push towards community engagement led them to programming choices that supported the work of indigenous artists. As conveyed by Senior Management, the Artistic Director of that organization directly attached that impact to the community engagement criteria of 2009 and hoped others would follow the same path, “There is that hope that organizations with a degree of capacity would actually see themselves as agents in their communities.” (Ibid). The question of an organization’s capacity and their ability to properly embrace community engagement as a practice is a central theme in the following case studies.

5.2.7. Focus Group Conclusion

The focus group data shows that regardless of a significant increase in community engaged programming after 2009, there remained a clear reluctance to bend programming to priority unless it was in support of an artistic community, individual
audience development or art already being made – areas of self-defined engagement that many of the organizations imagined themselves to be already pursuing, albeit, to a lesser degree. This, at least, was the near consistent stance as individuals shared their thoughts and recollections amongst their peers, a collective depiction of the embattled artist contending with a priority rolled out alongside the largest cuts to arts funding the BCAC had ever experienced. This confluence of self-defined engagement and rising precarity informed a conversation covering a wide range of issues including a fraught relationship to imposed societal structures, the perceived over stepping of limits by the BCAC, challenges of dwindling audiences and a lack of clarity in what was being expected of the artist. As individual case studies, the response to engagement read as less negative, became increasingly informed by organizational strategy and more specific to the differing skillsets of the artists. Additionally, the capacities of organizations to manage the increases in engagement programming, the role of the peer juries in determining organizational worthiness, and finally, the experience of losses and gains since community engagement became a priority at the BCAC came into clearer focus. In short, what was a narrative of collective resistance in the focus group shifted towards a story of haves and have-nots at the level of independent case study.
Chapter 6. Case Studies

While there was a certain uniformity to the focus group conversation, some organizations did differentiate themselves in how they responded to the prioritizing of community engagement at the BCAC. I chose three of these organizations, referred to as On the Ground, Mobile Theatre and Theatre at Large, to serve as case studies for this project. To begin, I will provide a brief summary of each of the organizations, their origin stories and a basic statistical and financial profile. Following that I will offer some comparative statistics. Then, using the data collected through interviews with the artistic leaders of the organizations, I will explore three of the core themes that emerged from the conversations, themes I have titled Priority Exhaustion, Alternative Voices and Peer Evaluation. Following that, I will complete the work with an account of the losses and gains as reported by the artists themselves.

As with the focus group discussion, the operationalizing of community engagement remains dependent on how leadership chose to define engagement for themselves and their organizations. What also becomes apparent through the case studies is how issues of operationalization, specifically organizational capacity and an ability to successfully articulate concepts to peer juries via grant applications become as important to the act of engagement as the actual process of making the work. While this does not necessarily lead to bodies of work that Clare Bishop labels “worthy but dull”, it does suggest that some organizations were much better prepared to enter the age of engagement than others, at both a practical and philosophical level.
6.1. The Three Organizations


Founding and current Artistic leader, Sam. The second founder Julie, no longer with the organization, participated via the focus group and email.

“My memory of it was that [community engagement] has to be a discrete identifiable group connected to a geographic place… homeless women in the Downtown Eastside.” (Sam, 2018)

“With, by and for a community. A community that defines itself as a community and art that comes out of a community need… this is kind of a pure definition…” (Julie, 2018)

At 13 years old, OtG is the youngest of the three organizations and the most intentional with respect to developing community engagement as a practice post 2009. Despite an incomparable drive and near immediate recognition by the local and national community for its ambitious work, OtG does not receive operational funding at either the provincial or federal levels and can therefore be considered ‘project based’. As such, full time staffing beyond its leadership is non-existent, “I am often the lead artist of the work. I also run the company. I do all fundraising and administration and management. The board and stuff like that” (Sam, 2018). As a result of having to build each project’s funding from the ground up, OtG has experienced significant fluctuations in its annual revenues.17

17 Rather than count expenses as an organization’s annual budget I have chosen to list revenues to better reflect the focus on funder.
A second reason for the fluctuations, most specifically the 2009/10 revenue spike to just under $453,063 can be directly attributed to the wave of Olympic funding and connected presentation opportunities that appeared soon after OtG was formed. The Olympics were central to OtG’s origins. “We saw an incredible growth in the company. It was like a start-up experience” (Sam, 2018). This project funding, much of it coming from The Vancouver Organizing Committee for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games (VANOC), did little for the long term stability of the company. “We got growth, we got energy, we got momentum, and then we began to see all those grants tank and all those monies go away.”

Julie, Sam’s partner at OtG until 2015, tells a similar origin story;

“The nudge to consider community engagement and our, frankly, desperate search for sustainability as mid-career artists whose company received no operating support… led me to move towards community arts and community engagement as a possible area in which to explore these questions as a separate wing of TOA.” (Julie, 2018)."

Sam, responsible for the strategic direction of the organization, “sat down and looked through grant streams… and saw you could have a professionally-engaged stream of work and a community-engaged stream of work. We wouldn't be pulling from each other's money” (Sam, 2018). As a result, OtG split its operations into two separate
streams, with Julie leading the community engaged work and Sam “the professional”. OtG’s committed community engagement practice as demonstrated in Figure 2 – a practice much more focused and concentrated than the other two case studies – was motivated by what I would suggest was an organizational need as much as any kind of driving social consciousness and completed after 4 years\textsuperscript{18}, coinciding with Julie’s departure from the organization. At this point Sam recalls switching their “focus into a more youth focused realm” (Sam, 2018), which while still engaged, was less specific relative to the with, by, and for measure they had previously adhered to. This shift can be seen in figure 5, which illustrates a systematic response to the priority in the years following its announcement.

\textbf{Figure 7: OtG’s Community Arts Projects}

\textsuperscript{18} It is important to note here how the following figure is made of unaudited information inserted by the organization into CADAC. The line from which this information is pulled asks for Total Number of Community Arts Activities, the purest of community engagement work. OtG has also maintained a consistent series of education programs (shown in comparative stats) as well as youth programs and community-based performances. Again, I am working at nuances of definitions and how the artist or organizations chooses to define engagement both in practice and statistics and then how this information is translated to CADAC.
Summary: Of the three case studies, OtG embodies what is perhaps the best example of an artist driven model of operation, one that works well outside of normal artistic conventions and one that, in the face of precarity, may have been ambitious to a fault. Recognizing that funding applications expressing an intent to downsize do not compete well at a jury table, OtG, quickly, and practically, adjusted to community engagement by expanding their operations rather than risk some other means of reducing or focusing its current programming. After all, as Sam puts it in a subsequent conversation, thinking big “is his wheelhouse” and big had served them well thus far in their larger-scale “professional work”. However, after watching their development over the years and as the basis of this research, I find it possible to conclude that the core artistry and intent of the organization may have become muddied during its two streamed approach.

6.1.2. Case Study B – Mobile Theatre (MT).

Artistic Leader, Sunny

“I think, to me, a big part of community engagement is actually engaging members of the public in the creation of the art in some way.” (Sunny, 2018)

Aside from having the smallest operating budget of the three organizations, MT is also the oldest (established in 1988), most artistically idiosyncratic, financially precarious and administratively challenged – characteristics that could be attributed to the organization’s origins as an anti-establishment collective intent on countering dominant trends found in the Vancouver theatre scene at the end of the 1980s and early 1990s. Based on its revenue pattern, MT can also be seen as in decline.
The purposes of MT, as laid out in its BC Societal constitution, included a number of stipulations meant as alternatives to what they felt were undemocratic and dis-engaged models of theatre production, including:

a) To express a commitment to the multi-racial nature of Canadian Society through the development of theatre productions that reflect this society.

b) To address through new and existing work, global issues and concerns and to set this address (sic) within the context of Canadian society.

c) To cultivate a new audience by providing accessible theatre and maintaining low ticket prices in order to encourage people with lower incomes to attend. Each production shall include at least one free performance.

d) To cultivate a young audience by creating approximately one-quarter of all productions for children,

(Mobile Theatre, 1994)

For the founders of MT, Vancouver’s theatre scene suffered for being systemically hierarchical and exclusionary. As artists interested in speaking to societal ills, they felt “the public wasn't engaging with theatre because you had to buy a ticket to go into a darkened room to get a theatre experience… and they wanted to bring it into the public's eye” (Sunny, 2018). This commitment to shared voice is something its
current artistic leader Sunny saw as coming out of their ensemble based training at Simon Fraser university and inherently “punk” ideologies.

While the anti-establishment or punk ethos of MT has diminished over time and Sunny recognizes a failing at continuing the company’s multicultural practice, the basic democratic ethos continues in its operating philosophy today. “We are trying to create work that inspires people. To open people’s minds and thoughts and creativity to other ways of seeing. We want to create connections between disparate groups”.

As the sole salaried staff member, Sunny serves as the lead producer for a small collective of associated artists, a non-traditional organizational model that he recognizes can conflict with both creative impulse and organizational efficiency, “The manager or producer often has a lot of creative decisions to make and the money can often influence a creative decision a lot. I often have to be very careful about how much power I have within the group”.

What sets MT apart from the other two case studies, and Progress Lab as a whole, is the organization’s predisposition to community engagement via its hyper-democratic origins, a collective ethos that, ironically, was conceived as anti-establishment in 1988 but by 2009 had become a government priority. That said, and regardless of its DNA, MT did not continue a clear commitment to community engagement programming throughout the period under investigation (see Figure 4). Similar to OtG their committed community engaged programming halts in 2014/15\textsuperscript{19}, and they have not found a replacement for this revenue stream.

\textsuperscript{19} MT’s statistical information previous to 2009/10 was not available.
Summary: TM is the most unique of the Progress Lab organizations. The singular and I would suggest successfully human\textsuperscript{20} work developed by MT is the result of a process that is potentially democratic to a fault. That said, as a colleague who has experienced much of their work over the last 15 years, my response to MT’s output is that it succeeds because of this ‘brokenness’, which is part and parcel of a process that embraces chaos. Unfortunately, in terms of the funding milieu, this chaos is also apparent in their administrative systems. As explained by Sunny, MT does not naturally align with the bureaucratic demands of the society system or funding world - either that or they reject it, which could be perceived as the same thing. MT, as a collection of artists, rather than a traditionally structured organization, have always remained outsiders and the hardest of all the Progress Lab companies to categorize. According to Sunny, this difficulty in categorizing extends to the provincial and federal funders who have hard time determining which funding discipline to include them in. In addition to a scattered

\textsuperscript{20} Human could also be substituted for organic or even unpolished. The mechanics of MT’s process, be that the style of the individual performances, the visible technology and occasional clunky dramatic structures are apparent in the final product. The audience does not get lost inside the sparkle of a MT piece but instead finds appreciation in the concept and recognizing the artist at work – not dissimilar to the brushstrokes in a painting or the movement of a handheld camera in contemporary film making. Whether this humanity is intentional or simply the result of not having the capacity or time to polish the final product is up for debate.
administrative system, it is also possible they suffer at jury tables due to an
inarticulateness in writing to discipline specific peers and the larger community's trouble
at assessing their style of work which tends to ignore convention. Of the three
organizations they could be considered the most precarious in every respect.

6.1.3. Case Study C – Theatre at Large (TaL).

Current Artistic Leader, William.

[Community Engagement] is the participation in the form of
nonprofessionals. And that can take a wide variety of forms. My definition
of community engagement is not populism… It’s narrow. It’s about
individuals. It’s relationships. (William, 2018)

With a 2016/17 operating budget closing in on three quarters of a million
dollars\textsuperscript{21}, TaL is the largest, most stable and classically institutionalized of the three
organizations. They operate inside a traditional artistic director and managing producer
model, have the support of two additional staff members, receive operating funding from
all three levels of government and maintain an active local, national and international
presentation and touring network.

\textsuperscript{21} William noted that TaL’s fiscal operating showed the big jump in 2017 due to what he has termed
a “radically inclusive” and large-scale touring project that included members of the Down Syndrome
community, one of whom served as a core writer and collaborator. He expects TaL’s revenues to
drop back closer to between $600,000 and $700,000 for the 18/19 season.
TaL’s artistic director William (not the founding leader but serving as either the co- or sole AD since 2005) attributes the organization’s continued practice of community engagement to the confluence of two distinct threads of influence in himself as a practitioner and person. His origins as an artist include being “someone who is trained at a national training institution… characters, stories, classics like Greek plays, well-made plays, for what that’s worth”, while his personal upbringing was influenced by racial identification and political awareness;

“I had a very radical Communist teacher at my very privileged high school who was in the miner’s strike in the UK. That is also where I became aware of my identity… or begin to self-identify, as an Asian and that was also during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in the early 1980s, apartheid in South Africa and the expulsion of the Palestinian Liberation Organization from Beirut. I was always political.” (William, 2018)

This mix of traditional training (starting with “a very inspirational English teacher and tickets to a London play a week for four years”) and built-in political awareness situated William and TaL in a place where he could take full advantage of the shift in BCAC priorities, a reality that continues today. “I already have the language about it. I
need this to be about more than just me… It’s social relevance…. What’s occurring in
the world right now.”

Another contributor to TaL’s success, and something I will return to in more detail
in the upcoming analysis, was the fact it was already an operating client at both the
federal and provincial levels in 2009. This stability, coupled with the fact William (and
former co-artistic director Sally) were really “good at writing grants… using our skills and
identifying and speaking to priorities to make it possible to do what we want to”, allowed
them to make the necessary adjustments to priority shifts. When challenged that this
sounded like he might be building his projects around government priorities rather than
creative impulse, something that repeatedly came up in the focus group as
disingenuous, William quickly responded with,

“No. The shows I am interested in, largely speaking, are fundable, the work
I make is fundable, because it’s socially relevant. Like honestly, it’s about
the world, it’s about more than just art, like high art, that’s what Canada
wants, we are do-gooders we think our art making should make people
better, should improve the world.”

As can be seen in figure 8, TaL has committed to a consistent and stable
community engaged practice both prior to and post the launch of the priority.

Figure 10: TaL - Community Arts Projects
Summary: Recognizable business practices, consistent strategic planning, community generosity and a high level of quality creative output have allowed TaL to remain consistently well-funded, prolific and respected by its peers. TaL also benefitted from a Canada Council supported initiative in the late 2000s and early 2010s that provided as much as $30,000 a year to support culturally diverse organizations to specifically build their organizational capacity. This support, while not the focus of this work should be considered in the organization’s ability to establish itself in comparison to OtG and MT.

Aesthetically, TaL is also the most conventional of the three case studies with William’s classical training guiding the company towards developing more traditional work than either OtG or TM. This is not meant to suggest the work TaL does is dated, but it remains more in line with the common understanding of conventional theatre practice at jury tables. That said, they remain conscious of this and consistently stretch their aesthetic via an ongoing practice of collaborating with outside organizations and artists – another strategy they use to successfully identify and elevate the company within their community.

6.2. Comparative Financials and Statistics

Where the above offered snapshots of the individual organizations, the following quantitative information seeks to situate the companies in relation to each other, their respective practices of engagement and their relative degrees of precarity to help illustrate what I see as an emerging have or have-not narrative.
From a revenue perspective, TaL is far and away the largest, most stable and fastest growing of the three organizations. This was also the case in 2008 when TaL operated with a budget of $315,000 and also 2017 when TaL’s budget was $742,000, an increase of 136%. By comparison, MT’s available funds were $116,000 in 2008 and by 2017, $59,000, a decrease of 48%. OtG’s revenues went from $295,000 to $246,000 in the same period, a decrease of 17%.

In line with its origin story as told by Sam and Julie, OtG’s revenue line shows an Olympic peak before experiencing a sharp decline the following year. OTG struggles for a number of seasons as they attempt to activate the community engaged arm of their operations. This new focus allows them to crawl up into a place of increased revenues by 2013/14 and then continue a slow climb in their post-engagement era due to what I would classify as a more individually authentic art driven practice by Sam.

Mobile Theatre’s narrative has been one of decline since engagement’s arrival. While they found a way to peak one year after the priority was implemented, MT’s operations have continued to shrink since culminating in a 128% annual decrease in 2017. Regardless of origin story, MT and its leadership have been unable to find solid
ground in a funding realm focused on the very values the organization was formed to support.

### 6.2.1. Revenue Sources as a Measure of Stability

**Figure 12: TaL’s Revenue Splits.**

Aside from some minor, likely special project related dips, TaL’s consistent growth is an indicator of an organization that continues to thrive under engagement. The lack of fluctuation can also be seen in the public support (never less than 50%) it receives from all three levels of government and its minimal reliance on the more volatile contributed (donations and foundations) and earned (ticket sales, performance fees etc.) sources.
As Figure 13 illustrates, MT sees a sharp decline in its heavily relied upon earned revenues following engagement’s arrival, an indicator of shrinking audiences for its work and a perhaps increased attention paid to its free community centre based programming. Its public funding, while somewhat stable, is of a consistently lesser percentage than TaL’s. Of the three organizations, MT draws the largest percentage of the less reliable contributed revenues year after year. A closer look at its financial data shows the majority of these contributions are made up of highly fluctuating personal donations, foundation funding and a consistent $25,000 in in-kind contributions. In-kind contributions are self-valuated, non-cash items, such as donated rehearsal space and staffing from partner organizations.
Figure 14: OtG’s Revenue Sources.

Figure 14 supports OtG’s Olympic story that includes VANOC’s one-time $226,000 contribution to an OtG project. Following that, the organization moves towards an increased reliance on public funding for its projects including the Arts Based Community Development Grants (BCAC) Youth Engagement (BCAC) and the Canada Council’s Artist and Community Collaboration grant. OtG also begins to build its BC Gaming support and attains operating status at the City of Vancouver Operating in the years following the Olympics. The small drop in 2015/16 public funding is interesting in light of OtG’s movement away from community arts work and could indicate the growing pains attached to a programming shift.

The above-mentioned Youth Engagement Grant provides a useful example of the BCAC’s continued commitment to engagement-based programming in the years following 2009. According to Senior Management, the Youth Engagement Grant was developed in 2012 as one of a suite of programs connected to the BC Creative Futures Strategy. As a result of some deft politicking on the part of the Arts and Culture Branch that aligned youth, the cultural industries and artist funding, the BCAC received a 40%
increase in 2012/13. While most of those monies would be focused on second wave engagement programs or “classroom to careers” plans (Senior Management, 2018b), $2 million went to the BCAC as an open increase for project funding and operating clients. TaL, for example, went from receiving an operating grant of $43,000 in 12/13 to $60,000 the following year. When reflecting on the boost and the woven alignment of BCAC and Liberal priorities Senior Management points out “[Youth Engagement] wasn’t a thorny problem, but it was part of their ‘jobs plan’ way of thinking” (Ibid).

With respect to the willingness and capacity of the three organizations to take advantage of the increase, Figure 15 (see red circle) shows both OtG and TaL building their BCAC support in the years following the introduction of these new monies in 2012/13, while MT drops²², once again demonstrating either an inability or unwillingness of to align its programs with funder priorities.

![Figure 15: BCAC Specific Funding of Three Organizations](image)

²² The large jump TaL shows in 2011/12, and peak exhibited by OtG in 2007/08 appear to be project specific and not related to engagement specific activities. The increase MT sees in 2015/16 is connected to a large project grant.
6.2.2. Public Impact

Prior to digging into the qualitative data gathered during the interviews, and as a final quantitative expression of organizational response to engagement, the following graphs chart how audience numbers, specifically attendance at arts education/learning activities and participation in community arts projects shifted for the three organizations during the period under investigation. Unsurprisingly, TaL remains a consistent presence throughout each area, likely due to their continued growth and size as an organization. Where the bars surge and drop off for the other two may be more interesting with respect to the impact of policy on programming choices, and by consequence, public involvement.

![Graph: Total Attendance at/Number of Participants in Arts Education and Arts Learning Activities]

Figure 16: Attendance at Arts Education and Arts Learning Activities

6.2.3. Surges and Dips

As was drawn from the focus group, many of the PL organizations turned to education programs in response to the shift towards engagement at the BCAC. This was certainly the case for all three case studied organizations, though TaL had similar numbers in the year prior to engagement's arrival and returns to it again in 2015/16. MT
and OtG who managed to attract nearly 2000 and 1500 respectively to their 2010/11 education initiatives both shrink the following year, though MT does maintain substantial numbers in 2011/12 before disappearing completely from the area of arts education.

![Bar chart showing total individuals engaged and in attendance at local community arts projects from 2007/08 to 2016/17 for On the Ground, Mobile Theatre, and Theatre at Large.]

**Figure 17: Total Individuals Engaged in Local Community Art Projects**

Figure 15 demonstrates a similar trend of immediate increases (11/12 and 12/13) in priority specific programming for the non-operating organizations, and interestingly, a drop off in attendance at TaL’s community engaged work. Why this drop-off occurs is unclear and could be simply a coincidental result of programming cycles. What is clear however is how both MT and OtG immediately and vigorously respond to the shift, each more than tripling TaL’s numbers in that short period. What is also of note is how TaL, like the proverbial tortoise, keeps producing community engaged work in the years to come regardless of dips or surges, an expression of stability very much in line with its operating status.

These examples, outlining the duration and scale of programming responses to priorities will provide a useful reference point for the next area of analysis, Priority Exhaustion.
6.3. Priority Fatigue

What remains clear from speaking to the participants is that priorities shift, and, as importantly, artists and organizational will follow those shifts to the best of their ability. Priorities deemed crucial to the creators of the original arts councils of the 1950s changed dramatically by the time the BCAC was formed in the 1990s and these priorities continue to adjust to the needs of the many stakeholders shaping arts and culture today. As is stated in the original BC Arts Council Act, the members of the council have a base responsibility of “(a) providing support for arts and culture in British Columbia,” and (b) providing persons and organizations with the opportunity to participate in the arts and culture in British Columbia…” (British Columbia, 1996). What results is a constant juggle of input that is then multiplied by the 16 different voices on council who bring their own life experiences and social agendas to the policy devising table. Multiply this by a near infinite factor of individual artistic impulses on the part of the province’s arts practitioners, managers and audiences and one should expect that, as one focus group participant put it, the priority pendulum “would continue to swing” (PL Focus Group, 2018). Based on the three case studies, I would suggest that, while the swing as dictated by grant assessment criteria is equal for everyone, it is the project-based client that has the most work to do in justifying their existence, establishing any kind of consistent administrative model and supporting a life in the arts. As a consequence, it is the project-based artists, who are also often the most experimental in practice, that have the most to lose in adjusting to the shifts – a reality that could push the bolder artists toward conformity in
practice and ultimately results in a dulling or weakening of the art being experienced by a city’s population.

With respect to the second part of the research question that asks how community engagement’s prioritizing impacted the programming choices of Progress Lab, both OtG’s and MT’s pure community engagement activity spiked in the five years following engagement’s arrival before falling back to nothing or less concentrated efforts. For the purpose of this research, I will label this behaviour priority fatigue. Differing reasons were offered for this.

In the case of OtG, Julie’s departure as the head of the community engaged stream and second salaried staff member may have been the most obvious factor. As was Sam’s interest in continuing to pursue his own practice of work that focused less on engagement, “too much that I want to do as a professional artist does not fit into the community engaged ways of making work as prescribed ” (Sam, 2018).

For Sunny and TM, a company that by most measures should be open to a wide and democratic breadth of voices and life experiences, a lot of the conflict with a strict engaged practice could be found within the work of managing a non-artist population in a creative process. Reflecting on their last with, by, and for project Sunny noted he “just took on too much for myself” in response to the arrival of community engagement (Sunny, 2018). The combination of making new work and stewarding a community resulted in “it just kind of turning into a disaster”.

Reflecting further, Sunny went on to explain that in more traditional professional models, “[p]eople know their jobs and you don’t have to walk them through everything. But people who have no performance training, it’s like a deer in the headlights as soon as they get on stage…. it’s a huge amount of work. I don’t know how some people do it.”
Sunny also expressed a frustration with the commitment on the part of the non-professional in community engaged projects. “Sometimes we would have twelve to fifteen people in a workshop one week and then three the next. Because it's all free, the level of commitment is much different.” To Sunny's credit he did recognize one of the issues could have been around the lack of remuneration at the project's outset. “We ended up paying a $500 honorarium to the people that were going to be in the show just to sort of … seal the deal. Then we didn't have problems.”

While a deeper analysis of the free participant labour involved in community engaged work is beyond the scope of this study, it is worth noting a trend in community engaged practice that often has community members volunteering or even occasionally paying to participate in publicly funded performance projects, a practice that raises some ethical concerns. Concerns made even more troubling by the fact that some of Sunny’s community members already exist as marginalized members of society;

Often the people who would come to our workshops, they just seem lonely because they were also a little bit weird... A lot of them you could just sort of understand why the only place that they could get together with other people was in this free workshop and that was one of my dislikes about community engaged work is that you end up working with people who were just a little bit weird and difficult to work with. You know?” (Sunny, 2018)

A possible gap here for Sunny was not defining who it was he was interested in working with inside this new stream of work. Rather than specifying a community, a strategy that could have supported a more deeper process and impact, anyone who showed up to the room could participate. Bringing together an assortment of people rather than a defined community made attending to a need, be it social or aesthetic, more difficult. “The people that were just a little bit ‘off’ for some reason, we would give them less responsibility, still everybody got to do something.”
Is this inclusionary or just opportunistic? What are the ethical questions at play when opening a creative process to the wider public rather than defining the specific group you hope to engage? Where these impacts considered when the BCAC began encouraging its artists and organizations towards community engaged work? It is one thing for an organization like MT to encourage this *build a show as you go* practice with professional artists, who while likely also ‘off’ or ‘weird’ by some other measure, share a common language in performance creation. However, to do this with the uninitiated public proposes larger questions including, who is monitoring the artist in their encounters with these populations? The very nature of project-based funding encourages artists to traverse new territory in their creative practice as they move from work to work. Healthy community engagement however asks for a deeper investment in the relationship, something Sam also recognizes the labour in;

“It's hard to find an organic process that they want you to have where it’s grown over this long experience of being with the community. Who is funding that? In a non-operating company it's nearly impossible to have that kind of connection” (Sam, 2018).

Priority exhaustion for William manifested in a much different way than either Sunny or Sam, likely because of his vast experience in community engaged work prior to its arrival as an assessment criteria. By 2009, William claims he had already “burned out on ACCP”, the Artist and Community Collaboration Program at the Canada Council, which appeared as a precursor to the BCAC community engagement initiatives. Referring, as did Sunny, to the specific style of working with a community of non-professionals, William went on to say, “I just didn’t want to go in a room with ‘the people’ and be like ‘hey everybody let’s do the thing!’… the honest truth was I just said I don’t want to do that as much, I want to make shows, so I focus more on making shows.” (William, 2018)
This reported move away from community engagement in the years following the 2009 insertion of the priority, while perhaps true of William, is not reflected in his organization’s statistics. TaL (Figure 15) exhibits a consistent program of community engaged programs over the last decade. I would suggest this to be the result of a series of factors including, one, the capacity of an organization with the size and staff of TaL to conduct community engaged programs ancillary to other less engaged work; two, the ability to classify programs as ‘community engaged’ regardless of differing with, by, or for measures – an ability that is supported by the un-auditable and self-inserted CADAC statistics system; and three, William’s ability to “speak to priorities to make it possible to do what we want to” (William, 2018). As long as community engagement remains individually-defined, and one’s individually generated definition is convincing to a jury – it is community engagement. Couple this ability to define priority with the strong organizational capacity and history of artistic achievement of TaL and there is little reason not to fund them.

The fluidity with which community engagement is defined continues to be pertinent to this conversation. Both William and Sunny brought up an inspirational 2006 performance as influential in their understanding of community engagement and how they themselves implemented the approach into their own respective practices. While their example is supportive of the BCAC’s assertion that the council was responding to trends already present in the arts community it is also reflective of a historic and ongoing lack of specificity in the priorities definition.

The piece they referred to was an adaptation of Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. While the lead characters were played by professional actors, an equal number of the cast of 22 were a culturally and ability diverse mix of residents from Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. According to William, one of the great achievements in
the work was how the community of non-professionals were often undistinguishable from the professionals, particularly in the large choreographed choral sections; “That opened my eyes to how you could use difference productively so that what people were asked to do reflected them and their strengths and made the piece better” (William, 2018). Sunny was similarly moved by the work claiming, that it led him “to basically try and copy Crime and Punishment in some way” with a series of engagement projects at a local community centre, including the one that caused him so much strife. But was Crime and Punishment worthy of the community engagement designation?

While it undoubtedly was made with members of a marginalized community, it was certainly not by them. Nor was it for that community, having been performed at the PuSh International Performing Arts festival, which by nature of ticket pricing and environment would exclude much of the DTES population. “It was pure with, it was pure aesthetic” (William, 2018). But does hitting only one of the three targets matter when the impact of its inclusive aesthetic was witnessed and so appreciated by an audience and artists paying $18-25 each to see it? It matters if you report it as mattering in a convincing fashion and it certainly matters when it informs the practice of artists responding to funder demands.

The degree to which an artist feels a freedom to define and then enact community engagement plays a direct role in how long it can be maintained prior to exhaustion setting in. What also plays a significant role in mitigating fatigue is the organizational infrastructure available to bring the programing to fruition. In 2009 TaL was already the most stable of the three organizations, benefitting from operating assistance from three levels of government in addition to the previously mentioned Canada Council Capacity Building funds. What this allowed was a continued and administratively supported programming of community engaged work with or without
William’s full involvement. In the case of Sam and Julie and Sunny, the programming and execution fell directly to them and any contract staff they could pull together on their limited project funds. How this impacted their ability to bend their creative impulses to priority was not specified, nor was there any mention of if they were able to see the lack of definition as a benefit rather than a hindrance. What is apparent from the gathered data was the community engaged work by both OtG and TM, by any definition, waned shortly after it arose while TaL was able to hold on to a stable and consistent program of activities.

6.4. Alternative Voices

During our first discussion, Senior Management noted that they had personally “grown up with this whole idea of culture trying to counter the capitalist model” but eventually realized in their work at the BCAC “you couldn't go very far to expose those kinds of leanings, especially under the Liberal government” (Senior Management, 2018a). As an individual tasked with representing both funder and funded, they eventually realized “what you could do was actually start thinking about what kind of activities you wanted to see.” (Senior Management, 2018a) and try to find non-prescriptive ways to get artists to buy in with their programming choices. “We wanted people to think about themselves a little differently in terms of the different communities that they served… but it wasn't directive, it was suggestive” (Ibid).

While the intention to open up room for new voices is commendable, a question remains in how much space there really is for new or different ways of seeing inside a system that rewards standard organizational and essentially neoliberal behavior. Based on the three case studies there appears to have been very little room for new voices to
enter the operating stream and attain the stability that the historically funded organizations enjoy. "It's a marketplace and we are selling products. And the products we are selling, we are selling to juries of our peers at art councils. So you have to make a product that a jury wants to buy" (William, 2018).

To clarify, this is not to suggest that the voices or opinions supported by William and his company are anything near what might be classified as neoliberal or culturally dominant, an utterly incorrect suggestion for a company that has consistently committed to challenging the dominant political discourse via its realization and dissemination of minority or marginalized perspectives. Where they do represent the corporate norm as compared to the other organizations studied is in their organizational model by which they run their company and the dramaturgical approach to their work, a result of William’s traditional training, and most certainly in their aforementioned “marketplace” aligned operating model. They operate a good solid business and can speak that language in a way that makes sense to funders and peer juries.

Sunny and TM are less convincing with their business acumen;

“I've always thought that, say you were an accountant and you are asked to provide all your numbers in the form of paintings. The accountants would say forget it I'm not an artist. But now they are asking us to suddenly become social workers. But were not social workers we are artists. It is out of our field” (Sunny, 2018).

What is MT’s field? Their origin story suggests it is outside the normal areas of play, that they were built to challenge conformity and not play by the dominant or suggested rules, but does a creative milieu grounded in precarity and operating in a metropolitan environment as financially challenging as Vancouver allow for the inclusion of new voices working inside less typical business models? Sunny claims their inability to conform to a sound business practice is not from lack of trying but due to consistent
under-resourcing and “focusing too much on projects and not the organization.” This consistent instability has resulted in what he refers to as “a chaotic administration… we made the strategic plans but the strategic plans didn’t always work.”

As a company that adjusted whole heartedly to the prioritizing of engagement as a practice, OtG offers the most intriguing example of a company in organizational limbo. OtG’s approach to the shift in priorities was to embrace “that the best thing that happens is when funding limitations provide boundaries, where you make discoveries and you innovate” (Sam, 2018). The following quote summarizes Sam’s line of thinking, one that based on the focus group conversation, he shares with many in PL;

“I never went to school to fundraise or run boards. I never went to school to direct or write plays which are now my main creative processes. Sure, I can do that. Look at all these other things that I've done that I'm not trained to do” (Sam, 2018).

Assuming that successful community engagement is a function of creative intention and organizational capacity, making the leap from the project to project juggle to a place of organizational stability is difficult, particularly when there are no increases to the operational program being offered by the BCAC.\(^23\) This precarity has significant impacts on a company’s evolution. Regardless of Sam’s willingness to commit to shifting priorities, he is by his own admission “always living in the project” (Ibid). If one of the intentions of community engagement was to provide opportunities for new voices, why hasn’t this allowed OtG to enter the operational stream considering their decisive shift to embrace community engagement as a practice? The process by which funding applications are evaluated could be one of the reasons.

\(^{23}\) Conjecture perhaps but on the operating jury I sat on the only monies available to either increase current operating clients or bring a new client on was $15,000.
6.5. Peer Evaluation

A necessary element to any conversation considering public arts funding is the concept of a jury of one’s peers, wherein funding requests are discussed and ranked by groups assembled to represent the community of artists and administrators, a process that also often includes deciding the amount of funding to be handed out or, on rare occasions, pulled back from operating clients. The peer jury system is relied upon to keep government at an arms-length and ensure that the practitioner’s voice is present in funding decisions. However, research has shown that it has some systemic concerns, particularly when a project steps outside the norm or represents an organization attempting an alternative mode of operation.

Donald Brenneis, in his aforementioned 1994 study of academic peer juries, attributes this to how a juror, through no unethical or fault of their own, can’t help but “acquire, at least temporarily, a bureaucratic self… and derives some satisfaction from that” (Brenneis, 1994, 25). His central challenge is with a system “already burdened by the sheer volume of materials that require decisions” (32) attempting to “standardize evaluation criteria” and “fictionalize objectifiability” (Ibid). His claim is that this process is inherently biased against the outsider or innovative proposal and favours the norm.

The complicated nature of what may be “the worst system, except for all the others out there” (Julie, 2018), remains an ongoing concern for Julie. “Ultimately it comes down to how the people on the panel adjudicating grants engage with the language and plans laid out by the artists, and that is never going to be consistent” (Julie, 2018).

While Senior Management is ultimately supportive of peer assessment at the BCAC, they feel it is overused, particularly in areas like community engagement.
Of the three current assessment criteria it is community engagement that we have the most difficulty with, right? We seem to be able to put people together that can talk about artistic achievement and the officers are all pretty good at looking at numbers and putting together some kind of evaluation of feasibility or sustainability, but the community engagement piece... I think really is, the fault, in the peer review system. (Senior Management, 2018b)

Senior Management cites the province’s International Presence\(^{24}\) Program, run by the province for which the staff at the BCAC adjudicate, as an example of a program that succeeds by not using peer juries. “I wouldn’t want [applications] to just live or die by the dynamics of a peer review process...they are about relationship building. You want the officer to be more of an [artist/organization] advocate than they can be on the Arts Council side” (Senior Management, 2018b). Community engagement, as it is loosely defined, demands a similar nuance in evaluation. However, as it sits firmly in the BCAC purview, it does risk confusion by peer jury, juries who, due to lack of training in areas specific to community engagement, struggle to find language to properly assess intents and purposes. “I mean training artists today rarely involves the kind of social science in the way that we define community. Is it demographic? How do you do that?” (Ibid).

Senior Management sees their work at International Presence as becoming a place where ‘we are able to talk about something as rarefied as work that is in the international realm… something that is as fundamental as work that is at the community level.”

The nuances of speaking to juries is not lost on William who, from his own experience of sitting on juries, notes that “assuming the [jury] members are even vaguely

\(^{24}\) B.C.’s International Presence pilot will support artists and arts organizations touring in key market regions.” (Government of British Columbia, Ministry of Community Sport and Cultural, n/d)
aware of these kind of priorities… sometimes it is literally like ‘I don’t really like them’, it’s really what it all comes down to” (William, 2018).

The “really don’t like” can extend to the “really don’t get” when a community engaged work has to be assessed by peers who have little or no training in the field. When discussing the projects at the table it often comes down to what language the juries share or trust another to convey, specifically, did they see any of the work previously made by the artist in question and if they did, did they even have tools to understand, represent or discuss it fairly? William’s history of working in a more community engaged realm has been called upon to help mitigate this issue;

“I remember getting a call to say ‘we need somebody to assess Theatre X\textsuperscript{25}. Will you please do it.’ Because they will just get a shitty assessment from other people and it’s not fair. They come to the table and everybody just dismisses them as not artful… Well I said the show was terrible but the engagement was really good because that was what it was, the show sucked and engagement was very strong.” (William, 2018)

The artful vs non-artful split in gauging a community engaged project can also extend to the assessment of work produced by one’s own organization. Sam recalls attending one of the community engaged works by his own company and being “gutted” by what he saw. The schism between a process dedicated to the with, by, and for a community influencing a product now being presented to the general public was difficult for him to come to terms with, particularly as he had participated in the original conceptualizing of the project. As part of OtG’s planning system Sam would play a central role in the visioning but then “[p]ass it off… that's just a problematic situation.”

“The values of community engaged work as defined by those funders are often not those

\textsuperscript{25} Theatre X (name changed) is an organization that focused exclusively on building work with, by, and for communities.
of the final product. We are still a professional theatre company that has its name on something that is happening publicly."

This crisis of quality echoes back to the “worthy but dull” terminology as expressed by Clare Bishop, where a process that forefronts public involvement may not be best suited for public consumption, a struggle that William also sees as central to his practice;

“… doing pure social work isn’t enough. But doing art that has, what I deem to be, no social relevance is not enough either. So, it’s about actually putting the two together… It’s always been a question” how do I make a political piece without being a fucking didact?" (William, 2018)

The difficulties of negotiating larger social purpose with artfulness remains consistent for artists attempting community engaged practice, a reality that is then passed on to peer juries attempting to assess project or season proposals. It can become a matter of the blind leading the blind, unless of course the designated community the artist is proposing to work with is the blind, in which case it would be the blind leading the blind pretending to know how to lead the blind.

Suffice it to say, in the case where a large pile of grants sits on a table and a jury is given a limited amount of time and an even more limited amount of funds to allocate, that peer group can become very bureaucratic very quickly, cut out any anomalies, move past any applications that don’t make immediate sense and award the funds they have to the most recognizable and/or safest applications. As a result of this process, the artist begins proposing projects that satisfy the norm rather than risk not being funded.
6.6. Losses and Gains

In an email following the focus group and as a final question at the case study interviews, participants were asked to offer their thoughts on what had been lost or gained for them as artists during this period of engagement at the BCAC. The responses covered a number of different areas surrounding the central themes of creativity and artist transparency.

For Sam, who of the three participants I would classify as the most driven by the abstract, the loss is when artists “cannot follow their true artistic impulse because the impulses are meant to come from the community” (Sam, 2018). While he has little problem conceptualizing community driven projects he struggled with handing over creative control to community. “It’s just too convoluted a way for me to create.” He accurately sees himself as an innovator, and the constraints of community engagement has not led to him “to innovate in the way to create the work that I’m excited about.”

Still, Sam finds some gain in the way funding priorities have forced open doors he did not even know were there. “The best thing that happens is when funding limitations provide boundaries where you make discoveries and you innovate”. As proof, he cited a need to adapt a youth and technology grant to a project that has evolved since OtG dropped the community engaged arm of its operations. “For a while [the youth/technology grant] was paired with community engagement, and now the youth program is being paired with the professional practice… and boy does it make the project stronger for using technology.”

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26 For reference, his current project explores the narrative structures of weather patterns.
Another gain for Sam is the evolving responsibility he feels to his audience. “I don't just want to entertain them anymore. I want a depth of experience”, something he hopes to continue through his work with place, rather than the focusing primarily on the community. “I'm good at working with place. I have an intimate relationship with places”.

Unsurprisingly, Julie, more the purist in her running of OtG’s engagement programs and now working in an community arts funding realm, sees a loss in the large amounts of energy that “has been wasted on wedging ideas and plans into an ill-defined criteria of 'community engagement'” (Julie, 2018). From an artist’s perspective Julie also has concerns for the traditional playwright in the community who may “get sidelined” in these initiatives, specifically “the nature of solo authorship as a central lens through which multiple voices may be heard”.

Similar to Sam and his concerns around the limits to creative impulse, Sunny’s concerns are for the bizarre or alternative expressions that may disappear as artists bend their work towards priorities. “I feel that maybe companies might not be as creatively adventurous as they might've been… a little less weird (Sunny, 2018).” He also mourns a potential loss in our collective ability “to suspend our disbelief” as an audience. “There was something about getting real people with real stories involved onstage just as there was in television. I feel like we were a part of that”.

Sunny’s concerns extend to the potential loss of intellectual expression as priorities increasingly ask artists to “engage the public” rather than “present an idea”, a conflict exacerbated by artists shaping processes to satisfy the multiple stakeholders often necessary to justify a community engaged project. “How do we fulfil what Susan (community centre programmer) wants us to do to get the grant?”
Similar to Sam and his developing interest in the “depth of audience experience”, Sunny and TM have recently started “doing smaller shows that engage people more deeply than to try to create a show that engages thousands”. However, and typical for a producer tasked with serving multiple artists on limited funds and organizational capacity, when asked about the economic challenges of this small audience concept inside his current operational model, he immediately began to fantasize about the complete opposite; “You know you can rent BC Place for $40,000 a day? What could you make and charge people two dollars each to see? It seats 80,000. Is there an idea that would fill it?” (Sunny, 2018).

When asked about the gains of community engagement as a priority William doesn’t dig into the positives too deeply, “So many of these priorities have come and gone I don’t even take them that seriously anymore” (William, 2018). When considering the losses, he offers a bit more;

“I think what’s lost is the same thing that is always what’s lost in relation to priorities, which is honesty and directness and clarity, because people spin to respond to priorities. Some people spin better than others and some people just spin” (William, 2018).

That spinning can be of concern, particularly when the means for evaluating the programs as spun are left to peer juries, assessors from the arts community and final reports created by the spinners themselves. “I do not have hard evidence but I suspect from sitting on a jury recently with the much, much greater emphasis on, and almost punitive, relationship to diversity, I can tell you there’s a whole host of fake programs going on” (William, 2018).

William also recognizes a loss in his own ability to create freely as an artist when tasked with the responsibility of running an organization like TaL. “There are times when I feel like, I mean this is one of them, where I am trying to take a year off and focus
mostly on me kind of projects. I would never feel the freedom to do that at Theatre at Large… That’s what’s lost.” Interestingly the core of the ‘me project’ he goes on to describe seems very much in line with the community engagement at TaL but he worries “just paying myself $15,000 to write my play about the social housing complex and immigrants at TaL would just feel so wrong…It’s not about other people – in the making of it” (William, 2018).

A closer look at TaL’s continued commitment to community engaged programming and projects dedicated to minority voices, not to mention an ongoing mentorship to younger diverse artists doing the same, does support the BCAC hope that prioritizing community engagement would provide opportunity for new voices. It also renders William’s claim of not taking funding priorities seriously as somewhat misrepresentative. William’s capacity to integrate priority into project, a skill that has become so second nature it can be dismissed as insignificant, remains a core and conscious strength of his organization - an organization that both supports a new generation of socially engaged artists and pays William a salary to lead the organization. From this alone it feels safe to say that in the case of TaL, much has been gained since 2009, but not without impact on the artist;

“When a company, with a decent professional reputation is proposing work that also promises to meet priorities and make the world a better place, to improve the society, to be less caustic, to investigate, to interrogate, to ask questions that are really problematic in the culture – that’s a good package. That’s something people get behind. And I think the reasons they get behind it are legitimate. And I also think there is a limitation to that because it’s much too heavy a burden for art making to bear.” (William, 2018)
6.7. Case Study Conclusion

The picture of engagement’s impact on PL companies, as represented by these three case studies, is one of have and have-nots, not dissimilar to any other grouping of businesses completing for a finite market share in an economy that awards business acumen. TaL’s already present organizational stability, pre-alignment to developing priorities and peer jury friendliness gave the organization a platform that continued to expand while OtG remained stagnant and MT fell into decline.

The fact that TaL was a ‘have’ in 2008 and continues to enjoy have status today, certainly in comparison to OtG and MT, provides some challenge to the idea that community engagement offered space for new voices via BCAC funding practices. Of course, if one were to step outside the collected data and confines of PL to include groups like the aforementioned Frank Theatre or Real Wheels, there would be suitable examples of new diverse and community focused voices being supported by the BCAC’s community engagement programs, either via project or operating grants. The same would also be true of one or two other organizations within PL with similar mandates and commitments to minority voice. However, the scope of this study remains the three case studies which demonstrate as many losses as gains under the new priority.

So, what is the takeaway? Is it correct to suggest that OtG and Sam’s work in the community engaged realm was time ill spent? No, considering the numbers of individuals impacted by the work OtG accomplished during that period and a creative practice that was deepened. Would that energy been better spent on the purely creative projects Sam is more inclined to take on? Perhaps, but that success may have depended on the funding now dedicated to a more community engaged realm of work.
In the case of MT, an organization seemingly in decline, community engagement did not provide a viable means to spark activity. Instead it challenged artistic impulse and then overwhelmed an already stretched administrative capacity. Perhaps the most pronounced gap in MT’s organizational functionality was not being able to convince funding juries of their alternative model, one which relied on multiple voices rather than a clear creative vision. While perhaps ironic in light of the democratic aspirations of community engagement which appear to line up well with MT, it is not surprising, particularly when MT is asked to compete with other more traditionally robust organizations like TaL.

In short, TaL had the skill sets and the mechanisms in place to succeed and did so. While a more dramatic analysis might have resulted had TaL succeeded on administrative capacity alone and not a concurrent and equally legitimate community engaged ethos, one of the takeaways here is that a traditional and recognizable business model combined with a willingness to make priority speak to impulse may be as essential to creative practice as the art making itself.
Chapter 7.
Conclusion

As a tool to help summarize the primary findings of this research, I will circle back to the beginning of this work and boldly propose four hypothetical programming concepts that might have prevented the Electric Company from suffering a 10% decrease in their operating funding due to a lack of clear community engagement activity. These proposals are not an attempt at a prescriptive fix but are used to summarize how community engagement as a priority, for all its small successes, may have been challenged by its pervasive ambiguity, an ambiguity that stretches from its implementation in response to indirect neoliberal pressures, to how juries of peers burdened by bureaucracy and competition assessed the priority in practice and finally to how it was strategically realized by artists operating in a precarious urban context.

Following the proposals, I will briefly attend to the original concern of external good in the arts and consider the urban implications of this research before offering some personal thoughts on how the British Columbia Arts Council might outline and operationalize future priorities.

The first offer of hypothetical community engaged programming, and one closest to the with, by, and for of pure community engaged practice is for the Electric Company to have developed a program or, even better, a series of programs that specifically engaged an obviously marginalized community in the envisioning, development and production of a new community-based piece of performance. Whether the artistic leadership participated or not would not have mattered. What would have ultimately mattered is that they did something, reflected on it and promised to do something similar the following year. This would have required an investment of financial and substantial human resources, and likely necessitated more successful funding applications to see it
through. Or, alternatively, they could have drawn from their existing operating funds which would have pulled from other projects.

A second option would have been to integrate members of a community into their process and have that integration present in the final product. This could be realized as a mentorship program for a group of young artists for example, again, ideally from an underrepresented community. A third option, one that moves even further from the with, by, and for, would be to host a series of forum discussions, in partnership with an outside organization, exploring the central themes of whichever work they were engaged in. The conversations could be between artists and community members, artists and experts, or experts and experts but witnessed by an audience of community members – or, once again, a community that recognizes itself as marginalized. The creation of some kind of publicly disseminated document – web-based or otherwise – would have helped to validate this effort in the eyes of the jury. From here they could have continued to move further away from the core values of community engaged work with programs that might open up their rehearsal space to emerging artists when they were not using it; free ticket programs; post-secondary or high school visits; and, as always, talkbacks with audiences following a show. What’s remains paramount for the purposes of any operating grant is that that program was convincingly aligned with the priority as understood by the jury, was rationalized clearly in the prose and was supported by a substantiated and recognizable system of operations.

As a final option, The Electric Company could have also taken the one or two pages designated to providing evidence of their commitment to community engagement to explain how their unique history as an independent theatre company who spends untold hours developing large scale, hugely ambitious works of art for the largest theatres in Vancouver exempted them for the community engagement assessment
criteria. That in response to this priority they were willing to admit they were much better at traditional theatre making and not particularly interested in a community impact beyond stunning audiences. That any attempt to stretch their capacities and interests towards community engagement would be disingenuous, do nothing to support urban branding or regeneration efforts and ultimately sap the creative energy needed to elevate their other work. The chances of their leadership entering this audacious attack during times of increasingly competitive and sparse funding would be slim, as would the hope of it surviving the intrinsically bureaucratic peer jury process. That said, I don’t know if it would have lost them any more money, in fact it might have been appreciated, though it is hard to say due to the consistent and perhaps essential, quality that continues to underlie community engagement as a funding priority – ambiguity.

Senior Management made it clear that community engagement remained undefined so that it might serve as inspiration rather than a prescription. It was meant to provide space; space for an artist to consider how they might individually speak to the place they find themselves working; space to honestly encounter the individuals living there; and space for juries to award socially inclined projects that might fall outside traditional modes of performance. Unfortunately for artists or organizations working without operational or core funding, a concurrent and overwhelming sense of precarity coupled with increased competition inside the sector rendered this space confusing. What is perhaps more interesting is how this inequity may not have simply been the result of a direct neoliberal or capital driven agenda on the part of government but also perpetrated by a community of artists inside the jury process.

Sitting at a value of 25% in the assessment process, organizational capacity is the most straightforward of the assessment criteria and has the potential to impact how everything else is graded. How an organization staffs itself in line with understood
business practices, how a group sells their tickets or advertises its work, number of
tickets sold, resources spent on advertising, the presence of deficits or surpluses,
remuneration amounts for staff and contractors – these comparative metrics are
relatively simple to sort out for a jury and can overshadow the other assessment areas of
artistic achievement (50%) and community engagement (25%). This is where I would
suggest the pervasive neoliberal agenda so many artists claim to push back against is
most immediate, not in an insidious top-down governmental pressure, but in themselves
as peer assessors suffering from precarious funding and pervasive inferiority complex.

As was shown in Chapter Four, the deep cuts and public questioning of the value
of art making in the province of BC had a significant impact on both the BCAC and
artists of the province. The attempt to nearly eradicate the BCAC accelerated a
have/have-not consciousness inside the independent theatre making community of
Vancouver, a sense exacerbated by an increased amount of funding being directly
awarded by the government rather than BCAC managed programs. This resulted in an
environment of mistrust; artist to funder; funder to ruling government; and even artist to
artist.

One of the great strengths of Progress Lab in its original form was the
collaborative ethos under which it evolved. As stated in the introduction to this work, the
group’s original purpose was to meet and collectively discuss concerns around aesthetic
– to find language that would allow for an open dialog inside of creation. These
conversations ultimately led to the co-creation of some increasingly large performances
entitled Hives One, Two and Three, with Three being very well funded by the Cultural
Olympiad in 2010. Save for a final series of smaller company specific events over the
next four years, the energy of the group dwindled. This may have been due to the
collective energy finding a natural end, the onset of middle age or arrival of children for
many in the group’s leadership, but it could also have been due to a confluence of the themes that arose during this research, including competition.

The urban environment that Progress Lab operates in is essentially very small. Not only do artists see the work of their fellow artists, they are also aware of who is getting funded, who is succeeding in their proposals and who is employing the most effective strategies in sustaining their organizations. This awareness, coupled with the cuts of 2009 and an increase in project funding over increased operating funds sparked a new and necessary entrepreneurialism in the sector.

This competitive reality was only exacerbated by the specific environment in which it occurred – Vancouver, an urban centre with global aspirations, a subscriber to the creative economy ethos, and a city with an administration accused of being as focused on bricks and mortar expressions of culture as it is on its artists. The artist, as a chronically underpaid member of society, is thus increasingly forced to compete for funds to survive and stay – a fight best won by finding the most strategic alignments with priority. Further research could look to how these same shifts in funding impacted rural or even suburban organizations, who by nature of their relative isolation, may or may not have felt the same competitive pressures.

A final remaining question, one that won’t be answered, is whether the efforts into community engagement offered any external good to society. At best, it was a wake-up call to the artist, particularly in an urban context, to say they are accountable to something larger than their own curiosities. This could be considered a core good unless one were to point out the many “worthy but dull” works that have also arisen over the last decade, an effort that in itself would be futile considering the equal amount of good but unworthy work, and/or plain good or bad shows as well. I am comparing degrees of grey
here, none of which have a clear set of measures. What community engagement, as opposed to aesthetic accomplishment, has done is raise the stakes in finding measures to defend. Whether a show is good or bad in its aesthetic or “purposeless purpose” is traditionally and comfortably subjective. Social relevance via community engagement, however, aspires to be something more. There is an increased sense of responsibility in community engagement and in how an artist might be impacting the shared environment around them. What the research has also shown is how this need to prove social impact, once coupled with pervasive precarity, has led some to creative wheel-spinning as artists attempt to make their output relevant to a population they feel less assured in knowing how to satisfy.
Chapter 8. Moving Forward

So, what does any of this research amount to as artist and funder negotiate the release of BCAC’s newest 2018-2023 strategic plan? In our second conversation, Senior Management suggested that the priority of community engagement would be replaced by a need to engage in the active decolonization of both the art being made in the province and the institutions that support it. “You can’t talk about being the arts and culture development branch without facing your colonial roots and recognizing you’re not developing this province” (Senior Management, 2018b). The new plan, released July 4, 2018, supports this vision. Decolonization and reconciliation, as well as the resilience and importance of the province’s Indigenous population, are critical to the document. Engagement, while not completely removed, is now expressed as values rather goals, the first being specific to “Indigenous Engagement and Cultural Vitality” and the second listed as “Engagement and Participation… for all people in British Columbia” (British Columbia Arts Council, 2018). What this means for the individual artist or organization remains to be seen but I would suggest there may be certain ideas to keep front of mind as this plan is rolled out, tested and reflected upon.

8.1. Definitions, Examples and Parameters

A priority that attempts to address a colonial past sounds as complicated as engagement, perhaps even more so, since it at first glance it appears to focus on a specific historic disparity. How the BCAC or the province’s Arts and Cultural Branch plans on framing colonial, postcolonial and decolonize will be crucial in avoiding an awkward proliferation of what Senior Management, borrowing a term from indigenous artist Cathy Charles Wherry, recognizes as a the growing “reconciliation industry”
(Senior Management, 2018b). Not unlike some less than successful and perhaps tokenistic engagement projects, the industrialization of reconciliation would have artists across the province immediately conflating decolonizing with indigenizing and begin looking for their next First People’s project and/or First Person to work with. As clear, or workable, a definition as possible of what decolonizing could mean across various contexts should be provided as a basis from which to grow and learn. “The themes are largely around accessibility, because that is where the colonial perspective inhibited the relevance of the institution.” (Senior Management, 2018b). If accessibility is a goal, I would also suggest offering different and varying examples for what access could means in relation to decolonization. Is it access to the creative process? Access as audience? Access to traditions? Access to conversation or alternative practices? Are there examples or measuring tools that company leadership or artists can work inside of? Take for example, the language of with, by, and for. Would a clearer understanding and effective operationalization of engagement practice have resulted if the artists had to interrogate these three parameters and explain how they were choosing to, or not to, operationalize them?

My sense from this project is that the BCAC is better positioned than ever to confidently define and roll out any new priorities. They have recently been promised a significant increase to their funding over the next three years by what appears to be a more hospitable NDP government. The Arts and Culture branch’s recent cross-sectoral work on issues surrounding reconciliation was the recipient of a Premiere’s award (Senior Management, 2018a), which hopefully suggests a strong base from which to begin the decolonization conversation. The BCAC as a whole has a number of long standing staff members working with a diverse range of institutional knowledge. For an organization that historically “did not play well with others” (Ibid), it may be that over 20
years of intergovernmental activity and adversity, coupled with the largest funding increase since inception will amount to a more effective way forward for both the institution and the artists and communities it supports.

8.2. Assessment Criteria

As an artist who has continued to propose, produce and create work throughout this research process, I would suggest that if there are to be any changes to the assessment criteria, the BCAC leave Artistic Achievement at 50% as it feels integral to creative practice. If there is to be any recalibrating, I would instead suggest opening up Organizational Capacity to include alternative structures not as strictly aligned with capital driven models, particularly if the de-colonization process also includes, what I would suggest is a necessary evaluation of the Society Act forced upon the creative community. For the final 25%, leave it open for the artists to discuss an area under which they feel they should be assessed. This could cover any area of the artist’s choosing from innovation, to intergenerational programming to decolonization to community engagement etc. Options could be provided, but assuming the organization is writing from a place of honest evaluation and reflection, the opportunity to identify one’s own strengths should lead to better organizational representation and less spinning. If the group can’t discuss their strengths and subsequently inspire others by what they are uniquely hoping to achieve there is a larger question of relevance to attend to. What this should do is encourage organizational singularity, mark certain organizations as redundant and consequently open up space for new groups or artists with fresh visions. This area of artist or organizational succession, or lack thereof, is worthy of continued research.
8.3. Decolonizing the Jury Process

As the BCAC moves forward with decolonization as a core value, they should also ask what this could mean to the peer jury process which currently adheres to a fundamentally colonial model. Need juries be conducted around large tables in nondescript board rooms? Need it adhere to a system of numerical ranking? Is there an alternative mode to be considered that might open the assessment process to less bureaucratic behavior?

This could demand a more detailed peer jury training and associated increased administrative cost – something that may cause some consternation for organizations. Juries, or at least operational juries, are made up of administrators and artists. As a result of the proliferation of artist run organizations in the last 25 years many of the artists included in the jury process also maintain an administrative role in their organization. When they sit at the table, research has shown they immediately lean towards administrative concerns. Should all information be assessed by all jury members? Is there a way that a strong creative project might go ahead without a clear organizational plan in the hopes that art might outweigh the business? The fear may be in funds being wasted on poor producers, but what if that focus was occasionally switched to the hope that a great work would be made by an artist with little administrative acumen?

8.4. Target Specific Artists and Organizations

A final recommendation is that the BCAC specifically target who it is they want to see succeed under new priorities and not be concerned with sector wide access or equity. If the goal of the next strategic plan is to address a pervasive colonial practice in the sector, target those organizations already working towards decolonizing. While this is
already being accomplished to a certain extent by the BCAC via its Aboriginal Arts Development Awards Programs, the BCAC should also look at where else decolonized activity is already occurring. By targeting those groups or artists already committed to a specific practice, knee jerk or “spun” applications will be avoided. As an example of a successful funding system that had a clear and, for good or bad, inequitable impact on some organizations over others, see the Canada Council Equity Office Capacity Building funding received by TaL. These funds, of up to $30,000/year, were given specifically to organizations already committed to culturally diverse practices and not available to others regardless of their willingness to shift their practices. One of the clear reasons TaL experienced the success it did was this funding allowed them to establish the strong administrative capacity it now enjoys. By adequately funding those already committed to the social priority, rather than spreading it out to anyone with a convincing application, positive examples were developed for others to see and follow rather than spin and stumble inside of.
Chapter 9. 
Epilogue: Urban Considerations

There is something telling in the structure of this research and how it repeatedly returns to the artist’s individual experience of policy. Conceptually, the work moved from a historical overview of arts funding to artist behaviour. This narrowing repeated in a methodology that began with two wide reaching interviews with Senior Management before landing in individual case studies of artists and their organizations. The artist, their practice and their response to prescribed public need has remained central to this study, not surprising considering my own background as an artist working inside the professional, and publicly funded, theatre realm.

The negotiation of policy can be fraught for the artist because it challenges the long held ideal that creativity is at its best when emerging from some undefinable and unique creative impulse. As makers of cultural materials, particularly new creations, as the large majority of Progress Lab are, the artist hopes to rely on impulse and talent, essential traits that may or may not always align with the public policies of the moment. I would go even further to suggest there is a certain social vacuum necessary in making works capable of pushing the boundaries of form, grabbing the attention of an audience, leaving an impact, and perhaps, even affecting change. The most successful of artists, i.e., those with the largest audiences, touring networks and esteem are allowed to continue to work inside this vacuum unchallenged. This may be due to the revenue generating potential they enjoy or the fact their houses are always full, but it is most likely due to the fact their work often rises above, as Senior Management calls it, “the gnarly social issues of the day”, in satisfying its own purposeless purpose. This work is relevant because it has achieved some undefined yet still agreed upon measure of excellence. Unfortunately, this stratosphere of art stardom is thin and with all the respect
I can offer, I would suggest the companies of Progress Lab, save occasional examples of brilliant work, exist one tier below art stardom and therefore have a different responsibility to their urban context. While it is possible that the dedication of funds towards community engagement rather than a continued or strengthened pursuit of artistic excellence may have slowed the ascent of some, it is difficult to be sure.

Due to a reliance on public funding, creation of culture can be considered a public service. The increasing hope of the funders is that publicly supported programs of work will result in some measurable societal benefit that extends beyond obscure measures of artistic excellence. This benefit can range anywhere from education, to increased cohesion amongst communities, to urban regeneration, to quite simply, offering the public something interesting to do on the weekend. In the past this delivery was the responsibility of a few large institutions meant to satisfy a largely homogenous population. Today, thanks to an attention paid to the actual diversity of cities like Vancouver, funders, artists and planners alike recognize no single venue or company can hope to provide a central representative experience. Similar to the notion of thinking globally by acting locally, community engagement has attempted to ask the artist or company to narrow their focus, release themselves of whatever aspirations of width of impact and recalibrate their energies towards depth of experience – a shift that challenges traditional markers of success. Community engagement forefronts an increase in the expressive capacity, representation and resiliency of smaller self-defined groups with the hope that these better supported parts will result in an increased urban resiliency.

Of course, this all involves choices and with choices there will be change, and in the face of change some artists and organizations will do better than others as they compete and employ individual strategies to integrate old priorities with new. It is worth
noting that Vancouver’s 2008-2018 Culture Plan focused on establishing Vancouver as a global “leader on the cutting edge of art, culture, and education” (Councillor Elizabeth Ball in Pablo, 2017), an aspiration that aligned with the aspirations of a city preparing for the internationally focused Olympics with its ongoing efforts to brand itself as global city open for business. In 2018, Vancouver’s new Creative City Strategy will be released. Again, responding to immediate concerns facing our city this iteration is prioritizing issues of reconciliation, equity and access in its core principles. A look at its focus group topics so far (see Appendix E) demonstrates a distinct concern for diverse voices. The groups listed as participating in these conversations are overwhelmingly dedicated to historically marginalized populations. Of the five theatre companies listed, two, Bard on The Beach and The Arts Club are the city’s largest, two others, Urban Ink and Full Circle are focused on indigenous representation, and the fifth, Real Wheels produces work focused on disability issues. None are from Progress Lab. This could suggest that the city of Vancouver is less interested in producing art stars or high-profile touring organizations to promote Vancouver but instead relying on a city brand that messages diversity, inclusivity and larger social cohesion – that art is for the people, those people are many and those people are welcome… assuming of course they can afford to live here. Where a cynical view would point to a practice of box ticking, a positive perspective would instead point to aspirations of urban health via pluralism, pluralism in both creative expression and expectation. Under these new directives, the artist is increasingly expected, and some would suggest operationalized, to support that optimistic vision.

An artist should feel entitled to make their work. They should also continue to expect to receive tax dollars to make it. These are Canadian values which defy neoliberal pressures and define the country more than any individual cultural product
ever will. However, this right to make work, no longer bestowed on centralized institutions, now comes with an increased responsibility to reflect the context in which it exists. William, quoting Vancouver singer song writer Veda Hille notes that Vancouver is still a ‘teenage city’, and that it is still finding itself. If arts and culture want to be part of this process of discovery it will have to make itself relevant, an accomplishment reliant on a deft balancing of creative impulse and prescribed purpose in making work that is both worthy and worth watching.
References


Kalin, N. M. (2016). We Are All Creatives Now: Democratized Creativity and Education. *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies, 13*, 32–44.


Province of British Columbia. (n/d). International Presence Funding. Retrieved May 1, 2018, from https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/sports-culture/arts-culture/creative-economy/international-presence-creative-economy


Senior Management. (2018b, March 5). Elite Interview 2 [Audio].


Appendix A: Progress Lab Companies and Websites

1. Boca Del Lupo (www.bocadellupo.com)
2. Electric Company (www.electriccompanytheatre.com)
3. Felix Culpa (www.felixculpa.bc.ca)
4. Leaky Heaven Circus /Fight with a Stick (www.leakyheaven.ca)
5. Neworld Theatre (www.neworldtheatre.com)
6. Rumble Theatre (ww.rumble.org)
7. PI Theatre (www.pitheatre.com)
8. Radix Theatre (www.radix.org)
9. The Only Animal (www.theonlyanimal.com)
10. Theatre Conspiracy (www.conspiracy.ca)
11. Theatre Replacement (www.theatrereplacement.org)
12. Theatre Skam (www.skam.ca)
Appendix B: Matarasso’s 50 Social Impacts of Direct Participation in the Arts

1. Increase people’s confidence and sense of self-worth
2. Extend involvement in social activity
3. Give people influence over how they are seen by others
4. Stimulate interest and confidence in the arts
5. Provide a forum to explore personal rights and responsibilities
6. Contribute to the educational development of children
7. Encourage adults to take up education and training opportunities
8. Help build new skills and work experience
9. Contribute to people’s employability
10. Help people take up or develop careers in the arts
11. Reduce isolation by helping people to make friends
12. Develop community networks and sociability
13. Promote tolerance and contribute to conflict resolution
14. Provide a forum for intercultural understanding and friendship
15. Help validate the contribution of a whole community
16. Promote intercultural contact and co-operation
17. Develop contact between the generations
18. Help offenders and victims address issues of crime
19. Provide a route to rehabilitation and integration for offenders
20. Build community organizational capacity
21. Encourage local self-reliance and project management
22. Help people extend control over their own lives
23. Be a means of gaining insight into political and social ideas
24. Facilitate effective public consultation and participation
25. Help involve local people in the regeneration process
26. Facilitate the development of partnership
27. Build support for community projects
28. Strengthen community co-operation and networking
29. Develop pride in local traditions and cultures
30. Help people feel a sense of belonging and involvement
31 Create community traditions in new towns or neighbourhoods
32 Involve residents in environmental improvements
33 Provide reasons for people to develop community activities
34 Improve perceptions of marginalized groups
35 Help transform the image of public bodies
36 Make people feel better about where they live
37 Help people develop their creativity
38 Erode the distinction between consumer and creator
39 Allow people to explore their values, meanings and dreams
40 Enrich the practice of professionals in the public and voluntary sectors
41 Transform the responsiveness of public service organizations
42 Encourage people to accept risk positively
43 Help community groups raise their vision beyond the immediate
44 Challenge conventional service delivery
45 Raise expectations about what is possible and desirable
46 Have a positive impact on how people feel
47 Be an effective means of health education
48 Contribute to a more relaxed atmosphere in health centres
49 Help improve the quality of life of people with poor health
50 Provide a unique and deep source of enjoyment
Appendix C: Senior Management Interview Script

Topics of Conversation with occasional probing questions as needed.

A. Artist Audience Relationship

1. In 2008/09 the words ‘community engagement’ was first used in a BCAC annual report when it became the third goal of council. By 2010/11 it was goal 2. Prior to this the concept was defined as ‘participation in’ or ‘exposure to’ arts and culture. Why did the language change?


3. What does engagement mean? Muddy word - less committed than participation - make more space for artist in their visioning? Or more for the public?

4. What are some examples of successful community engagement that you saw/ have seen in Vancouver’s theatre community?

B. Internal Realities

1. What challenges do you see for the BCAC with respect to community engagement?
   - Was there a transition from art is good for you to art is good for the economy?
   - Was there council resistance to this shift?
   - How does an increase focus on community engagement impact ‘art for art’s sake’?

2. Did the council expect to see any significant changes to the work?

3. What challenges do you see for the BCAC supported artist with respect to community engagement?

4. How has the continued prioritizing of public engagement affected your work at the BCAC?

C. External Forces

1. There was a lot of arts funding turmoil in BC around the 2008/09 period with the cuts to Gaming funds and the resignation of BCAC chair Judy Danzo. In
what ways did you perceive the BCAC’s arm’s length relationship to government being challenged?

2. In April 2007 the BCAC was "established as a distinct branch of the Arts & Culture Division of the Ministry of Tourism, Sport and the Arts"? A year later the letterhead on the Annual Report shifted from supported by the BC Gov to an agency of the BC Gov. Same year as the word engagement. Same year as financial crisis. First year of Olympiad. BCAC cuts. Gaming cuts…

3. After Mavor Moore the council leadership has become increasingly corporate, do artists make poor chairs?

4. In 2010/11 and 2011/12, The Minister of Community, Sport and Cultural Development Ida Chong showed up in the Annual Report with her ‘Report from the Minister.’ Why?

Exit - So that’s an hour. Thank you so much for that.

1. (if rolling) Would you like to continue?

2. Is there anything else you would like to offer? Please email me if you do.
Appendix D: Case Study Interview Script

Rapport builder: Let’s start by scanning the scene here. I am going to choose someone and I want you to speculate on how they might engage with arts and culture. What do they watch? Read? Listen to?

Topic of Conversation with occasional probing questions as needed.

A. History and position in the arts and culture ecology.

   1. Describe to me the work you do as a theatre practitioner and/or other.
   2. How long have you been doing it?

B. Role, function and purpose.

   1. What do you consider your role in, responsibility to, your community?
   2. How do questions of social relevancy enter your practice?

C. Concept of engagement in Arts and Culture.

   1. Tell me what the words community engagement in the arts mean to you.

D. Experience of engagement in professional life.

   1. How has the prioritizing of public engagement affected your work as a working theatre artist? Projects chosen etc.
   2. Do you recall making work differently prior to its installment?
   3. Tell me about any unique approaches to engagement programming you have employed as a leader and artist.
   4. Can you explain a project where engagement as a policy, philosophy or practice stood out?
   5. What’s been gained, what’s been lost in this age of engagement?
   6. Why do you succeed (or not) in this climate?

Exit
1. Would you like to continue?
2. Is there anything else you would like to offer? Please email me if you do.
Appendix E: Creative City Strategy – Focus Group Topics and Findings

Background & Context
Public Engagement Participation

Focus Groups

Indigenous Artists
Indigenous Arts & Culture Organizations
Racialized/Ethnocultural Arts
Cultural Centres
LGBTQ2+ Arts
Dis/ability, Deaf, & Mental Health Arts
Arts organizations working with people living with low incomes and/or in poverty
Individual Artists
Arts & Culture Policy Council
Grantees - Cross-Section 1
Grantees - Cross-Section 2
Grantees - Cross-Section 3
Creative Industries
Affordability
Theatre Rental Grant Users

Background & Context
Participating Organizations

231A
312 Main
All Bodies Dance Project
Arts Club
Art of BC Book Publishers
Atomic Cartoons
Ballet BC
Bard on the Beach
Battery Opera
Bill Reid
Canadian Music Centre
Carnegie Centre
Centre A
Contemporary Art
Community Arts Council V.
Compagnie V/n Dans
Creative BC
Dance Centre
DOXA
El Production
Emily Carr University
Endless Summer Fest
Fazakos Gallery
Firehall
Full Circle/Talking Stick
Gallery Gachet
grant gallery
Hapa Festival
Herd Rubber
Heart of the City Festival
Hogan’s Alley Cultural Centre
Huai Foundation
Instruments of Change
Italian Cultural Centre
Japanese Cultural Centre
Jazz Fest
Karen Jamieson Dance
Kokoro Dance
Kwi Awt Stelmexw
Lark Productions
Lattimer Gallery
Centre Culturel Francaisophone V.
Maritime Museum
Museum of Vancouver
Mozilla
Music on Main Society
NGX Interactive
Out/Inner Space
PuSh Intl. Festival
Queer Arts Fest
Raven Spirit Dance
RealWheels
Recovery Through Artist Studios
Sad mag
Seismic Shift Arts Society
Skwachays
Sound of the Dragon
SUCCESS
Sun Yat Sen Garden
TaiwanFest
TedFilm
The Cultch
University of British Columbia
Uninterrupted
Urban Ink
VAN. Arts Colloquium Society
VAN. Asian Film Festival Society
VAN. Asian Heritage Month
VAN. Indigenous Media Arts Festival
VAN. Intercultural Orchestra
VAN. Intl. Bhangra Festival
VAN. Murals Fest
VAN. Opera
VAN. Latin American Film Festival
VAN. Queer Film Festival
VAN. Symphony Society
VAN. Chopin Society
VAN. Chamber Choir
VAN. Seniors’ Singing Club Association
VAN. Symphony Society
VAN. Verses Festival of Words
VISCERAL
VISIONS
VIVO - Video In Video Out
VocalEye
WebPress
Western Front
Youth Collaborative for Chinatown