

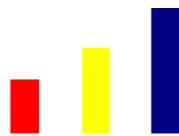
Media Arts Study and Profile

Phase 1 Final Report

Prepared by Hill Strategies
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Kelly Hill, Project Manager and Lead Researcher
Lisa Fitzgibbons, Research Associate
Robert Labossière, Research Associate
Dawn Dumont, Researcher



Hill Strategies

93 Hastings Avenue
Toronto, Ontario M4L 2L1

www.hillstrategies.com

416.406.6145

Media Arts Study and Profile: Phase 1

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Executive Summary

Based primarily on 71 interviews with individuals involved in the media arts, this report provides a snapshot of Canada's media arts sector in 2003, including significant information about media artists, media arts organizations and funding organizations. The report profiles a sector that is rapidly changing, difficult to define, very active, and struggling to find money for its activities. While many artists, especially younger artists, are turning to the media arts to explore their creative vision, many expressed concern over the exhibition opportunities for their works. Along with a profile of the media arts sector, the report highlights some impacts of the media arts, challenges and needs in the sector, information and data needs, and priority areas for action by government and service organizations.

The Hill Strategies research team was commissioned by the Canada Council for the Arts and the Department of Canadian Heritage, with the participation of the Independent Film and Video Alliance, to undertake a study of the media arts sector in Canada in order to:

- provide information needed to demonstrate the importance of the sector in both artistic and economic terms;
- contribute to a better understanding of the current realities and functioning of the media arts sector and the differences between the media arts sector and media industries; and
- assess quantitative and qualitative data needs with the goal of developing the ability to track and monitor the media arts sector over time.

This study is the first phase in a longer research project on the media arts, with a second phase focussing on data development and analysis. Although Phase 1 findings will assist departments and agencies to develop or review policies and programs affecting the media arts, the terms of the study did not include specific recommendations on the programs and services of Canada Council, Canadian Heritage or the IFVA.

The research team and the project steering committee attempted to ensure that interview respondents covered a wide range of representational issues, including artists, organizations, medium, genres, region, gender, cultural diversity, Aboriginal peoples and both official languages. The interview process was qualitative, with the objective of gaining knowledge of the significant characteristics of the media arts sector rather than determining quantitative information about interview respondents. In addition to the interviews, the research team conducted background research that confirmed the steering committee's hypothesis that there is a relative lack of current statistical data on the media arts sector.

Profile of the sector

The 71 interviews made it very clear that the range of artists' work in the media arts, comprising film, video, audio and new media works, is quite broad. Types of film works include fiction, experimental film, documentary, shorts, medium-length and feature-length works. Examples of the kinds of productions done in video format include single and multi-channel video works, video integrated into performance works, and video integrated into installation pieces. Audio work includes audio and electronic production, music and sound events, radio and web-based broadcasting. New media productions include robotics, interactive installation, computer animation, web-based projects, software development and network-based artwork. Since media artists often experiment with tools and technologies and combine existing media tools and disciplines, these lists are not comprehensive.

Many interview respondents believed that an increasing number of artists are working in the media arts. Some noted how media arts techniques are being adopted by artists working in other disciplines, such as visual arts, theatre, dance and music, which has led to a hybridity of practices in the media arts.

The interviews made it clear that media art cannot easily be defined. The fast pace of change in the sector, especially surrounding new media work, makes it difficult to pin down the boundaries of the sector. Some interview respondents noted that definition in the sense of categorization is problematic and sometimes undesirable. However, there are some key characteristics of the media arts sector, including:

- the predominance of artist-run non-profit organizations;
- the simple fact that media art is generally created by individuals who identify themselves as artists;
- the use of technology, meaning contemporary digital, mechanical, acoustic or electrical devices; and
- experimentation and innovation in tools, technology, content or approach.

Media artwork exists in relation to broader cultural definitions of "media" or the media industries. Where it was discussed in interviews, there was a general acceptance of the concept of "artist-driven" or "artist-controlled" work as the defining line between art and industry. Much media artwork differs from the media industries because of personal, intimate or experimental approaches to content. Media art may be focussed on particular socio-political issues and is often critically engaged with technology and its impact on society.

Clearly the biggest change in the media arts sector in the last ten years has been the development and adoption of digital technologies. Respondents noted that lower costs of digital equipment and software have made it easier to create media works. Although media art production is often a collaborative effort, involving technicians, actors or production assistants, access to digital tools has to some extent brought about a "pyjama revolution": artists can and do work more on their own, often at home. Despite the

accessibility of some digital technology, only a minority of artists interviewed owned their own equipment. Respondents indicated that artists often self-produce up to a point and then complete their works using the sophisticated and costly systems available at media arts production centres.

Many artists are struggling to finance their work in the media arts. Given the expense of producing and distributing work, artists' revenues from grants, sales, rentals and exhibitions may only cover hard costs associated with a work. Artists are rarely paid for the time invested in a project. Most respondents indicated that they invest heavily in their own work, using income from full-time, part-time and contract work as well as teaching opportunities and family support. Many artists indicated that they are time-stressed, juggling "day jobs" with artistic projects that demand concentration and time.

Many respondents indicated that the production and exhibition of works by culturally diverse artists are key to the development of the media arts. But the research team also found that the ways in which artists' works focus on race, diversity and identity vary considerably. Many respondents believed that systemic barriers in production have been addressed in a fairly satisfactory manner, and some culturally diverse artists felt that they have opportunities that are similar to other artists. Others indicated that a number of programming initiatives and other opportunities once available to culturally diverse artists no longer exist.

Awareness of a connection to popular media was highlighted by many working in Aboriginal communities. The research team was told that Aboriginal youth, especially in isolated communities, are often exposed mainly to mainstream forms of entertainment like television, movies, music and video games. Because of this, the ambitions of artistic Aboriginal youth often focus on the media arts. Other respondents noted that the media arts constitute a natural area of endeavour for Aboriginal people because of strong Aboriginal storytelling traditions.

Media arts organizations are involved in the production, distribution, exhibition, promotion and archiving of materials related to film, video, audio and new media. Organizations are also active in developing a discourse about the media arts, including some publishing efforts. Most of the organizations in the sector are artist-driven, with artists having a key role on boards of directors and in many staff positions.

The establishment of artist-run media arts production centres has led to reasonably good access to equipment in most cities across the country. Basic questions were raised in some interviews concerning duplication of equipment and services in some communities and the degree to which production centres should specialize. No consensus emerged from the research team's interviews.

Professional development is an important aspect of the mandates of many production centres. This is especially true for Aboriginal centres, many of which have a particular focus on training Aboriginal youth.

Workshops, artist-in-residence programs and access to equipment are all ways in which centres encourage and foster the development of artists' skills. Some organizations engage in outreach activities with communities generally perceived to be voiceless in mainstream media, including queer youth, urban Aboriginal people, ethnocultural communities and economically-challenged communities.

A less measurable benefit of artist-run production centres is the creation of a community of like-minded people. Centres function as hubs in developing and maintaining personal and professional relationships that can have important impacts on artists' careers. However, many younger artists appear to be less open to the services and networking opportunities at media arts centres and tend to approach centres at the end of their productions on a business-like fee-for-service model. Some younger artists – used to business models – expressed misgivings about the services and efficiency of some media arts centres. Reaching younger artists and bridging any existing generational gaps are specific challenges for production centres, and many are attempting to address these challenges through a variety of initiatives.

The move to digital technologies has changed the nature of services provided by many production centres. Given the intricate languages of technology, there is an increased need for expertise rather than simply equipment. However, the increase in the number of artists owning their own equipment has led to the sense of a more scattered community, making it harder for organizations to attract members and to provide networking opportunities and a sense of community.

Media artworks are shown through festivals, media arts programming organizations, galleries, museums, cinémathèques, cinemas, web databases, websites, television, biennales and educational networks. Artists are often involved in organizing events to present their own work and have given rise to an infrastructure of artist-run organizations to distribute and exhibit media works. Artists told the research team that young programmers have had an important impact on the sector in the last ten years. Many young programmers are finding new work and new artists and bringing them to the attention of festivals, galleries and other presenting organizations.

Festivals provide a valuable outlet for the exhibition of artists' work, and many are collaborating with production centres to ensure exhibition opportunities for works produced at centres. Respondents noted that the popularity of many independent film and video festivals indicates that there is a significant audience for media artworks. Some artists have built their careers through festival opportunities. However, many respondents expressed the need for more permanent venues and a better-structured, cross-country exhibition circuit for media artworks.

Regarding distribution, the research team was told that the artist-run distribution network is uneven across the country, with no distributor of media artworks in the Atlantic region. Many artists expressed a desire for a more active and better funded distribution network in Canada.

Interviews revealed that many media arts organizations' budgets are insufficient to meet their aspirations, and organizations curb their activities to fit within their budgetary means. Overall, the main source of revenue for media arts organizations is government grants, but public funding for the media arts varies across the country. Some organizations rely on project funding to sustain their operations. The main sources of self-generated revenues are equipment rental, sales of supplies and services, ticket sales, bar sales, fundraising initiatives and even contracts for event coordination.

Media arts organizations, like other organizations in the cultural sector, face a range of difficult human resource issues. Most organizations expressed the need for additional staff. Many staff members interviewed by the research team felt overworked and underpaid and expressed serious concerns about burnout given difficult working conditions. Many organizations rely on volunteers and short-term employment program staffing to coordinate and carry out certain activities.

Impacts of the media arts

Respondents told the research team that media art is a very modern and current artform. Media art appeals to youth, who were brought up in an environment that involves media such as TV and gaming. Respondents indicated that young artists are turning towards the media arts in significant numbers. Media art was also seen by media artists as the artform closest to popular culture, placing it in a unique position. There is much curiosity about media arts and media tools.

Some Aboriginal respondents indicated that the media arts help make Aboriginal culture more accessible to the world in general.

The media arts exist at the crossroads of art, science and technology. Many respondents noted that innovative techniques, technology, formats and perspectives pioneered in the media arts have been appropriated by mainstream TV, advertising and commercial film. Others noted that media art often exerts influence on the direction of culture and new uses of technology and can be considered part of the research and development infrastructure for technology.

Many respondents noted that the real impact of media artworks is qualitative in nature, in that media artworks create opportunities for broad reflection and dialogue on culture and society. Many in the sector are engaged in initiatives with disadvantaged and marginalized groups.

Challenges, needs and gaps in the sector

Many respondents identified distribution and exhibition as a large gap within the sector. Respondents noted that many media artworks are not reaching their full potential audience. Difficulties in finding sufficient exhibition and presentation opportunities were consistent between Aboriginal, culturally diverse and other artists.

Many respondents indicated that, through better distribution, Canadian media artists could have more exhibition opportunities and greater impacts nationally and internationally. Some respondents raised questions about the uneven distribution network in Canada and the ability of artist-run distributors to market artworks, especially given their tight budgets. Distributors noted that they lack sufficient funds to produce catalogues and other promotional materials and to update their websites as often as they would like.

Many artists attempt to distribute their own works, but it is difficult for artists to identify all the opportunities, make the necessary contacts and negotiate deals in a complex web of markets, including festivals, galleries, programming organizations, TV, the internet, schools, etc. It is clear that current markets for media artworks have not provided artists with sufficient exhibition and income opportunities. A viable economic model for the sector is not readily apparent. There are limited opportunities for artists to show works and even fewer opportunities to sell works. Broadcasting opportunities have not turned out to be what was hoped for 10 or 15 years ago. The educational market, which used to be a strong outlet for media works and for distributors specifically, is now weak.

Many respondents noted an absence of the necessary infrastructure and technical expertise to adequately support the presentation of many works in film, video, audio and new media. Many expressed disappointment with the limited programming of media works in museums and larger art galleries.

The need for increased communication within the sector was a clear theme among interview respondents. Media artists and organizations expressed a desire for more networking, collaboration and even possibly some sharing of resources. Artists and organizations in more isolated regions expressed a need for more opportunities to travel to other communities and to bring in national and international artists to their own communities. Some respondents noted a need for research and information that could be used to raise the profile and demonstrate the cultural value of the media arts in Canada.

Many respondents spoke of the need to improve the visibility of the sector, including more media literacy work in schools, universities and museums. Some respondents noted a lack of critical discourse about media art in Canada. While many Canadian media artists have gained recognition outside of the country,

some told the research team that without knowledgeable critics, curators and audiences in Canada, their work and the media arts generally do not get enough attention at home.

Some respondents believed that the general absence of curators in the media arts sector is felt even more acutely in the exhibition of works by culturally diverse artists. Criticism of representation on race and ethnicity was also found to be seriously lacking. Access to culturally specific work, workshops, seminars, programming, exhibitions and discourse is uneven across the country, even in large urban centres.

Some of the concerns and issues expressed by culturally diverse and Aboriginal artists were strongly related to concerns expressed by other artists. For instance, some expressed concern for the opportunities for culturally diverse artists to sustain careers in the media arts. In addition, a number of Aboriginal artists and organizations spoke of the need for mentoring to develop interest, expertise and activity in the sector. Media art is in an emerging state in many Aboriginal communities, and a number of organizations are experiencing staffing and service delivery problems related to the growth of interest in the sector, especially among Aboriginal youth.

A number of respondents identified a need for arts councils to be more sensitive to the definitional challenges that artists are facing and more helpful in finding ways to support their art regardless of whether it fits neatly into one funding category or another.

Data strategy

In order to make a compelling case for the media arts to financial decision-makers and the broader community, government and service organizations in the sector require more information about media artists and media arts organizations. The Canada Council, the Department of Canadian Heritage, the Independent Film and Video Alliance and others need sector-wide data to inform financial, policy and program development as well as service delivery and advocacy initiatives. The research team was charged with developing a data strategy to respond to these needs.

The research team found that much work needs to be done to fill information gaps about the financing and activities of the sector. Given the needs in the sector concerning the exhibition and presentation of artists' work, data on these aspects of the sector is seen as the top information need.

The proposed data strategy focuses on the development of a survey of media artists and the collection, analysis and dissemination of data from organizations concerning their activities and finances. A draft of the media artist survey, along with implementation possibilities, is included in the full report. The report also outlines the means of collection, analysis and dissemination of data on organizations' activities and

finances. The report stresses that the data strategy must be integrated with a series of measures to improve distribution and exhibition.

Priorities for Action

Based on the challenges, needs and gaps identified in the interviews, the Hill Strategies research team developed recommendations regarding short, medium, and long-term priority areas for action by government and service organizations to improve the state of the media arts sector in Canada.

The top priority for immediate action is the development and implementation of an integrated package of activities to improve the distribution and exhibition of media artworks. Canadian artists need more opportunities to show their works, and the Canadian distribution system needs to be improved to facilitate these opportunities. Respondents expressed a strong belief that significant money and effort should be devoted to expanding audiences for artist-driven work, including support for exhibiting and presenting organizations that wish to undertake audience development strategies. Partnerships should be developed in order to increase exhibition opportunities through TV and the web. Education and development work should be done with museums and galleries to develop exhibition opportunities for media artworks.

Another short-term need in the media arts sector is information sharing and networking among artists, arts organizations, service organizations, government agencies and others interested in the state of the media arts sector. A major media arts conference, along the lines of a Media Arts Summit, could help to improve qualitative and quantitative information-gathering and could provide a significant opportunity for communication and networking. In addition, a website with broad-based media arts information and links to resources in the media arts could also contribute to networking and information-sharing in the sector.

A third short-term need is increased funding for media artists and media arts organizations to help with their art production, staffing, services and financial stability. Additional funding for tours and travel could help the exhibition of works and networking in the sector. In addition to increased public funding, many in the sector thought that initiatives could be undertaken to encourage the private sector to contribute to the media arts.

In the medium term, there is a need for Canada Council and stakeholders to find ways of managing the landscape, addressing competing priorities and managing such a varied and diverse set of practices within the sector. For example, Council has to attempt to accommodate the funding needs of a range of centres for both equipment and expertise. Basic questions were raised in the interviews concerning the degree to which organizations should specialize or provide a wider range of services and equipment. Some respondents raised the question of equipment duplication between media arts centres. No consensus emerged on these subjects from the research team's interviews.

In the longer term, a concerted effort is needed to raise the profile and recognition of the sector. Many artists and organizations lamented the lack of recognition of the media arts sector, both within the arts and in broader Canadian culture. Collaborations should be initiated to disseminate information about and improve the profile of film, video, audio and new media works. Partnerships with all levels of the education sector could be developed to improve media literacy and knowledge of the contribution of Canadian media artworks to Canadian culture and society.

Finally, the research team heard that, despite substantial productivity, many media artists are not able to make a living from their artwork. This speaks to the long-term need to make significant efforts to improve artists' remuneration. This should include a greater commitment to artists, including those who create media works, a commitment that must be reflected in greater recognition of artists' work and more substantial financial support.