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IF FUNDERS REALLY WANTED TO SUPPORT ARTISTS, WHAT COULD THEY DO?

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If funders really wanted to support artists, what could they do?

There is constant criticism of bodies who fund art. Artists often feel that they are speaking a different language to funders. As artists' priorities and approaches to risk differ from the ones of funders, artists can feel alienated rather than supported by funding bodies.

In a lively and constructive debate, moderated by Jeremy Smith, Australia Council for The Arts and Susanne Danig, Danig Performing Arts Service, participants formulated several concrete suggestions for funders to take into consideration in their future policies and funding schemes.

Before setting up several working groups to formulate the propositions towards funding, Jeremy and Susanne introduced the participants in the current affair of things by inviting a panel of four representatives of funding bodies and four artists / producers to share their knowledge and personal experiences.

Arts funding from the funders' point of view

The funders' panel was presented by: Cate Canniffe, director of Dance & London at Arts Council England (UK), Mary Ann Cauchi, director Funding and Strategy at Arts Council Malta (Malta), Isabelle Mestdagh, project manager at Wallonie-Bruxelles Théâtre Danse (Belgium), and Saxe Lomholt, Creative Europe Desk - Denmark, Agency for Culture and Palaces (Denmark).

Being an experienced art manager himself, Jeremy stirred the panel to some of the acute points of friction between artists and funders:

Moderators:

Susanne Danig, Director at Danig Performing Arts Service, Denmark

Jeremy Smith, Arts Practice Director - Community, Emerging & Experimental Arts; Lead - Regional & Remote Australia at Australia Council for the Arts, Australia

Speakers:

Vahid Evazzadeh, Chairman of The Counter Institute, Denmark

Israel Aloni, Artistic director and choreographer at iDance, Sweden

Sabrina Apitz, Project coordinator of Performing arts programme - information, consulting & qualification / Artist of performance collective EGfKA, LAFT Berlin - Association for the independent performing arts, Germany

Alysha Herrmann, writer, theatre-maker and creative producer at Part of Things, Australia

Cate Canniffe, Director Dance & London at Arts Council England, UK

Isabelle Mestdagh, Project Manager at Wallonie-Bruxelles Théâtre Danse, Belgium

Mary Ann Cauchi, Director Funding and Strategy at Arts Council Malta, Malta

Saxe Lomholt, Creative Europe Desk - Denmark, Agency for Culture and Palaces, Denmark

- How do you, as a funder, get out of the artists' way to let them doing their art once funded?
- What are your assessment procedures? Do you provide feedback on applications?
- What are the two major complaints artists have from your programme?

Both Cate and Mary Ann stated that their funding agencies would sometimes want to "stay in the way" of the artists they support - but for reasons which revealed to be quite far from wanting to control or mingle with their work.

Art Council England (ACE) is a subcontractor of the government, so they simply need to respect certain procedures and require certain information to report it to the government. Also, ACE has the duty to hold account on diversity and inclusion, so they intervene to make sure this has been abided by the funded art organisations. Otherwise, ACE is evolving its programmes so that they would allow artists to take more risk in their work.

Jeremy agreed that while in Australia Council for the Arts (ACA) they aspire to new programme designs (a 2015 overhaul of the ACA core grants programme saw the number of categories available streamline



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from 128 – each with their own criteria – to just 5 to simplify the application process for artists and organisations) which allow artists to take more risk and spend more time making art, they still have a series of strategic investment programmes, that allows them as a funding agency to make some structural adjustments within the sector (and in some cases, stay “in the way” with a more hands on approach).

Mary Ann from Arts Council Malta (ACM) assumed that if artists seek for a funding agency to support their work, this is already a call for having it “in the way”. Many artists believe that once they have their contract signed and they have ticked all the boxes required, then that’s it, they can close their communication with the funders; while funders feel that they need to be more involved during the implementation of the funded project. For instance, the agency can help brainstorming new aspects of the projects, or with finding the right venue. “It might be, that having the Arts Council in the way can actually make things easier”. On the other hand, when ACM steps away, it means that the creative organisation they have supported is sustainable enough to function well on its own.

Isabelle from Wallonie-Bruxelles Théâtre Danse (WBT D) pointed out that for a funding body with a focus on international mobility grants, it is key to keep the balance between helping emerging companies to be seen abroad and the necessity to secure new contracts from these travels to achieve effectiveness of the programme.

Saxe from Creative Europe Desk – Denmark described his main duty in the information bureau as getting in the way of artists and showing them the way to achieve a successful Creative Europe application. “Often artists have their creative ideas rooted in their own community, while Creative Europe collaborations need to find common points across partners from other countries as well. So, I help them seek the European dimension of their creative ideas” – Saxe explained.

Who evaluates the applications, how are points being awarded, why some get funded and others – don’t: these questions have always been interesting to artists.

Jeremy conveyed that basically, ACA employs two types of assessment processes. One is through peer review, peers being artists, producers, arts

managers from the field¹. The other type of assessment combines staff and industry expertise. The current peer review process was overhauled in 2015 with the grants programme – and saw a shift away from rigid boards of peers, so new people were involved in the assessment process each round. ACA does provide feedback to applicants – overall notes about the round (trends, consistent issues, gaps in support material) and direct feedback relating only to those applications which are discussed during the assessment meeting.

At ACE, applications are reviewed by the staff. Cate confirmed feedback is given on most applications where possible and appropriate. But in the case of some new initiatives (such as the Developing Your Creative Practice program) the high volume of applications submitted, means it is not possible to provide feedback in these instances. Whenever artists do insist, they can inform themselves on the assessment of their proposal by phone.

ACM has developed a transparent assessment procedure, relying on a pool of independent external evaluators², experts in their field. Each project is reviewed by three independent evaluators who get together to decide the final score. They provide to ACM recommendations on the extent of funding for each project, but the final decision is with ACM. Applicants, especially the unsuccessful ones, are provided with feedback on their proposals. ACM are considering inviting a mixed panel of experts and non-experts from the community, in the project assessment procedure.

When reviewing small mobility grants, WBT D usually decide internally but when greater resources are to be allocated, they require a proposition to be prepared which then is reviewed by a jury. WBT D do not have enough resources to supply official written feedback to every candidate requesting some small form of help, but informally, they give consultations and advice about subsidies to any artist or company.

¹ At ACA, there is a pool of 550 peers who are experts in their field. Their names are disclosed after the assessment is completed.

² The names of the experts are not disclosed.

Creative Europe has a strict evaluation procedure. Each proposition is evaluated by two independent experts. Each expert submits their evaluation in an assessment form. The first and the second expert assign their points and a third expert consolidates and awards the final score. EACEA (Agency Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency) sends each applicant a detailed feedback on scores and comments. This feedback is based on the consolidated final assessment of the experts.

All the representatives in the panel have admitted that they received complaints about the complexity of their application forms. As Cate from ACE put it, "It takes a lot of effort to apply and that is not paid." The variety of application forms across different funding bodies puts an additional burden on applying artists. That is a major complaint in French-speaking Belgium, where applicants can seek funding from various structures in the Brussels or Wallonia Region and end up with different application forms for every type of programme in each region.

The complexity of the application process seems to be the tip of the iceberg for Creative Europe projects. Once approved, applicants complain about the bureaucracy in communication, demanding reporting and accounting procedures, which seem to be a constant workload to them. Creative Europe projects typically involve large amounts of funding, distributed among several international partners, so this might give justification for the extensive reporting.

In Malta, artists also complain about the endless paperwork. ACM has also received feedback that each year the same beneficiaries keep winning funds, so now ACM is thinking of ways to diversify the grants so as to include new actors. One might assume this issue is typical for the smaller countries because of the fewer art companies who applying for funding, but Jeremy confirmed that similar complaints are received by ACA as well. In Australia, a large amount of funding is directed to major performing arts organisations

whilst a far smaller allocation is divided up among numerous small and medium-sized organisations, groups and independent artists and arts workers.

The duration of the application and assessment processes have been subjects of complaints too. Sometimes it takes so long that the project proposal is no longer up-to-date. This is often the case with delays in mobility funding.

Arts funding from the artists' point of view

Susanne Danig invited the artists' panel on stage to discuss the complexity of the status and variety of roles of independent artists, to share their experience with different funding bodies, and to outline what does not work in the artist-funder relationship and possible ways to improve it.

The artist panel featured Vahid Evazzadeh, Chairman of The Counter Institute, Israel Aloni, Artistic director and choreographer at ilDance, Sabrina Apitz, Project coordinator of Performing arts programme - information, consulting & qualification / Artist of performance collective EGfKA LAFT Berlin - Association for the independent performing arts, and Alysha Herrmann, writer, theatre-maker and creative producer at Part of Things.

Vahid is a theatre director and filmmaker from Iran, who is based in Denmark and the UK. He would not say that his situation is complicated, "it is just difficult to secure funding", he explained. "In Denmark, if I accepted to act as an immigrant and make "immigrant integration" projects, I would have been funded for sure. But that is not the art I want to make." The difficulties come from policy-makers' thinking that art funding programmes should address certain political agenda outside arts and culture. This for instance, results in having grants with immigrant quotas, which fund integrational art projects but prevent immigrant artists to compete for funding for professional artists.

Vahid has also applied for funding in the UK where he has two successful applications and one unsuccessful. The feedback he received there – as opposed to the situation in Denmark where he did not have any feedback on his applications – proved to be valuable and useful.

So Vahid considers that introducing regular, systematic feedback to applicants will enhance the quality of their applications, hence, their chances of securing funding for their art projects. The other thing Vahid would like to see changed is the inclination of funders to design their funding programmes in quotas and in service of political agendas. The dialogue between cultural sector and the political decision making should be a reciprocal one.

Another improvement he would suggest would be to step away from the current procedures of searching for calls, writing applications, and then, implementing these applications into art projects. Writing an application to meet set criteria is not consensual, Vahid claimed. It is not inclusive either because many artists come from cultures where the application-based funding is not a common practice, as is the case with Iran, for instance. Wouldn't it be more flexible and inclusive if the funding bodies opened up for dialogue and start discussing the project design with the artists? That would help them understand the field better and would help achieve diversity better than the quota principle.

Israel is artistic director and choreographer who is a nomadic artist too, working between Sweden, Australia, Israel, and pretty much anywhere where their art projects take them... So, the company ilDance, which Israel runs together with Lee Brummer, gets funding from various places and funding bodies. Seven years ago, when the company was established in Sweden, the biggest problem that funders saw in their projects was that... they were too ambitious. The funders needed them to go step by step and would support them if they proved to be resilient. But that would happen if the company actually got some funding to make their work, Israel noted.

So, iDance started applying for smaller grants from funders around the world. A US donor happened to be among their supporters. "Our advantage as artists is the creative way of thinking about sourcing our projects. Instead of twisting our work to fit to the funder's criteria, we divided the processes into modules which would then meet the funder's objectives."

On the good side, iDance got the necessary funding, albeit in small portions. On the bad side, filling all the applications, going through numerous assessment procedures, then the constant paperwork of reporting the progress to funders – all that took so much energy and efforts. And generally, the fundraising work is not being paid.

Israel has been an evaluator at some application assessment sessions and has noticed that there is a kind of hidden agenda in regards to whose work gets funded. "I have seen many artists, putting a lot of effort in developing some great, innovative art projects, not being funded because of that hidden agendas, which took into consideration the gender, the colour of the skin, the nationality of the applicants... None of them was explicitly announced in the programme's guidelines." There is a need for a lot more transparency about all the criteria around assessment procedures and funding preferences, Israel insists.

"We can have a two-phases selection procedure. The first phase can be a call for ideas and I would suggest that this call is anonymous", shared Israel, "Thus we will make sure that the best ideas are selected instead of selecting the individuals or the organisations with their background and demographics. Then, the second phase will ask for developing the selected ideas in applications, and this developing process has to be funded."

According to Israel, introducing application writing skills in the education system would be highly beneficial for independent artists as many of them have no idea how to develop a convincing application to fund their art projects.



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Alysha works in South Australia, making multidisciplinary art projects with regional communities in rural areas, young people who are just emerging as artists. When looking back at her time as an emerging artist not so long ago, she cannot help noticing that any of those specific programmes that supported her as a young artist, do not exist anymore. "When budget cuts hit, the first thing is to reduce the money for culture and then, for young people's development. But, do we have to operate only within the arts funds? Can we get funding through other agencies and sectors?" – Alysha is positive that arts funding can be diversified among other programmes, concerning health and well-being, regional development, and so on.

As for having separate programmes designed to accommodate participatory / inclusion art and professional art, Alysha does not consider this separation fruitful. "It is either a strong, critical piece of work, or not; and it does not necessarily depend on making it with professional artists or with the community."

Alysha's experience with applying for arts and inclusion programmes and consulting others on their applications has proven that the overall application procedure is not inclusive at all. It states it is aimed at inclusion, but at each application step it is exclusive for artists and communities that are not accustomed to application

procedures – who actually are the ones who are the subjects of "integration". This has to change.

Sabrina shared her experience what it is to work and fund work in an independent artist collective. The process of preparing applications is not funded in Germany. The artist collective Sabrina is part of has designed a payment policy on their own, so that when someone works on a certain application, they get paid for that work. "In fact, we try to cover any kind of work: from rehearsals to cleaning and cooking", Sabrina explained.

As feedback has been outlined as a useful tool to improve applications, Sabrina mentioned that German funding bodies don't usually provide feedback to applicants. Her collective proposed an application to Creative Europe once, and that's when they received a feedback. Their proposal got rejected, but the comments they received served to improve the application and to prepare a better one next time.

To develop the application writing skills never seemed to be a responsibility of the funding agencies in Germany. Sabrina and her art collective hold workshops on writing applications to various donors. These workshops are open to people outside their membership too.

The general issue of project-based working is the lack of stability it poses on organisations, and this is especially true for artist collectives. Longer periods without funding between two projects cause people to scatter to other projects or organisations. Additionally, the extended assessment and funding procedures can sometimes reflect in an inability to conduct the project if the artists are no longer available.

So, giving an extensive feedback to applicants and having shorter approval procedures would significantly improve the artists' experience with the funding programmes, according to Sabrina. Another useful addition would be the opportunity to get scholarships or research grants for those periods between projects which are critical for the sustainability of independent art organisations.

Four areas that call for change, and several suggestions

Summarising the issues that transpired from the two panels, Susanne and Jeremy narrowed them down to four thematic areas. The participants in the room spitted into four groups, consisting from artists and funder's representatives. They brainstormed new approaches and proposed measures for change. Some of the suggestions are radical, others are practical and seemingly not that difficult to implement. All were given with the aim to improve the funding programmes so that they reflect the actual workflow and expertise of the artists.

Diversity and inclusion

Enhance existing professional platforms for unrepresented groups. Allocate money for them to support the artists, since they have the expertise and knowledge in the field and know better the right methods to support the artists and their working formats.

The application process

Establish a two-step application process. First round: anonymous applications of ideas. Second round: The authors of the selected ideas are allocated with resources to develop the project applications which then compete for the project funding.

Funding for research and travel costs, related to the application development; funding for presentation of the project proposal.

Let the artists choose the application format according to their art field. Do not be limited to written applications only.

Allocation of resources

- Elaborate schemes to distribute resources to previously not funded artists and projects.
- Ask regularly funded art organisations to support individuals and artists by mentoring them and by giving them space and funds to work.
- Let others in to the funding management and distribution process. Invite organisations and artist collectives to handle funds in

specific domains in order to better adjust funding schemes to different art field(s).

- Allocate funding for the position of the producer in the art organisation, so that the artists can focus on making art while the producers take care of finances, applications, reporting, and accountability.
- Involve experts who actually know the art field well, so that they can create environment that fosters diversity and inclusion.

Feedback and transparency

- Adopt radical transparency: publish all the applications online, together with the budgets so that everyone in the field can estimate where they stand in terms of payment to artists, funds distribution, quality of proposals, etc.
- Livestream the assessment sessions or publish the minutes from the discussions.
- Provide feedback to each applicant in a structured way or if this process is too laborious, establish alternative procedures to inform the artists on the assessment points of their applications.