

RECOMBINING

A Keynote at the Yukon Arts & Culture Sector Gathering

February 27, 2026 | Yukon Arts Centre, Whitehorse

Owais Lightwala & Sarah Garton Stanley

THE DOWNER

THE UPPER

THE RECOMBINATION

OWAIS:

The Prologue

SGS:

There are two of us and one keynote and that math doesn't work. We're not going to pretend it does. What we are going to do is spend some time descending into some hard truths and coming back up with some things we think are worth holding onto. We're not here as experts. We're here as two people who have been inside similar pressures long enough to have opinions and honest enough to know our opinions aren't the point. Yours are. This keynote is compostable. The next two days are in the garden. You're the gardeners. We're just turning the soil. Welcome to The Recombining

OWAIS:

Act 1 - The Downer

SGS:

Here goes. A simple question, but a hard one. Are you willing to speak to where you actually are? Not the public-facing version, the grant-application version, the dinner-party version — but the version that honestly assesses how you actually feel about your working conditions?

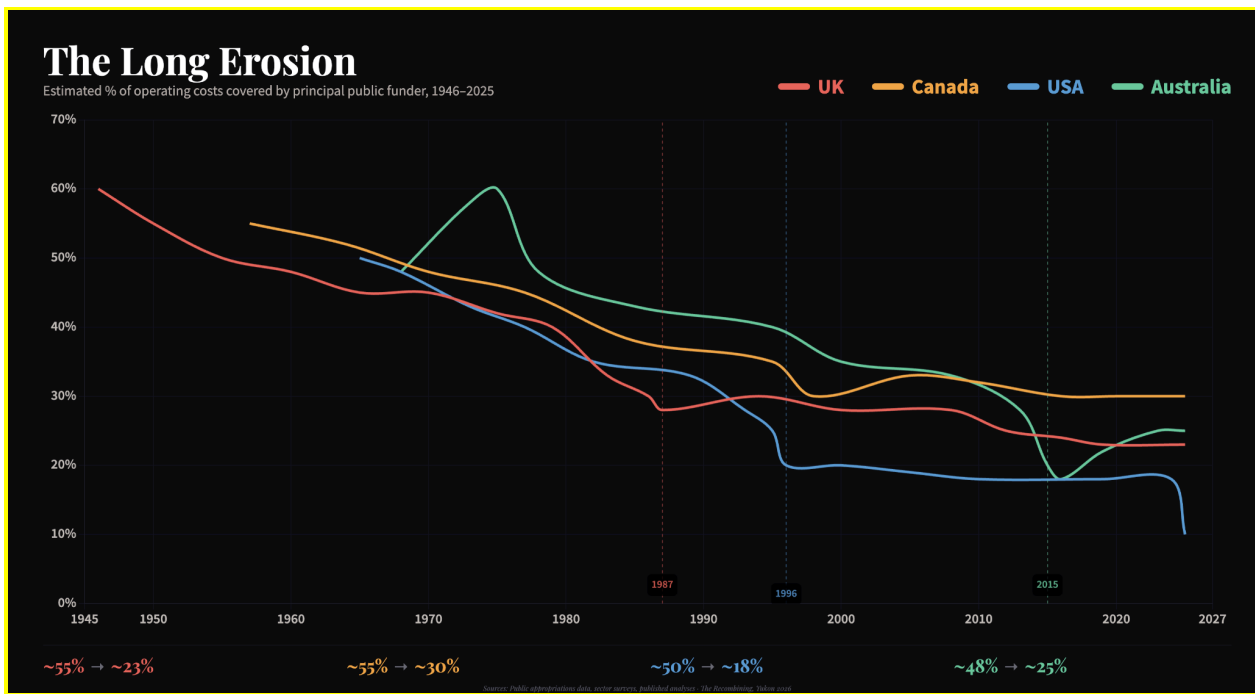
I am going to posit that there is a general sense that access to decision-making is out of reach, that agency in "the way things happen" is limited. This feels like a global condition. Who is making these decisions and why? And are they being made in my best interests, or in response to what is thought to be my best interests, or worse still, *pretending* that they care about my best interests? And when this compact between "how and why things happen" and *you* is broken... then a whole bunch of other depressing things come into focus.

I know it's not the case for everyone... nothing is... but I'll bet that for many of you there's a sense that a major problem is money. And while a lack of money may or may not be your biggest concern... there are interesting structural reasons that account for there never being enough of it. And I think knowledge of this can be helpful. It allows us the room to know a little bit more as to why our dreams feel curtailed and our bottom lines looking like chipped cement at the bottom of an empty swimming pool.

Because strange though it seems... to look back through time... there has never been enough money. It is often the case that the people who are in a position to make decisions about us are the very people with the least knowledge of what it is we do or need. This appears to have been true in the past, as much as it appears true today.

For example, cultural support systems were never set up to fully resource our work — direct government funding, arm’s-length arts councils, our whole apparatus for cultural policy on this land... all of it... was arbitrarily - it seems - formed to *not* fund the arts to the fullest. And since its inception, it has only decreased in its capacity to meet the true cost of making culture, paying people fairly, and sustaining organisations over time. And from the outset, this was so. A decision was made.

Here is an illustrative chart that literally *is* a downer...



UK: Gradual, managed decline from ~55% to ~23%, with one sharp rupture in 1987 and a slow bleed since 2010 compounded by local authority collapse.

Canada: Relatively stable decline from ~55% to ~30%, cushioned by periodic injections but never restored; the sector grew faster than the will to fund it.

USA: Sharp founding-era generosity, a genuine 1970s–80s peak, then a politically catastrophic cut in 1996 from which it never recovered, now facing possible elimination.

Australia: The highest founding coverage ratio of the four (Whitlam), the most dramatic single rupture (Brandis 2015), the most structurally damaged small-to-medium sector as a result.

This may not be news to you, but it is worth repeating. From the UK to Australia to the US and back to Canada, there was never a moment when government funding underwrote the entire operations of an organisation. It's been better than now. That's for sure. But it's never been what it might have been. Ever. So the fact that there was more *then* doesn't change the fact that it was *not enough* then. Not enough then and not enough now. So. Now what?

Underneath those plummeting lines... the funding apparatus in decline... we're looking at lines built on top of colonial foundations. The Canada Council, the arm's-length model itself, the whole structure of cultural policy in this country, was designed by and largely for a particular idea of who defines culture and what culture is *for*. Indigenous artists, Black artists, racialized artists, queer and trans artists, geo-locations outside of Upper and Lower Canada (aka Ontario and Quebec), all have navigated a system that was not built with them at its centre. That's still happening.

And underneath all of that (remember Act 1 is the downer - sorry/not sorry) the market logic that has seeped into every part of our public life has done something specific to the arts. It has rebalanced the inherent value of a public good and attempted to recalculate it as a product. It has made us justify our existence in economic terms. It has taken work that is, at its root, about what it means to be human — and asked it to compete with a spreadsheet.

COVID let us know that we weren't essential. Or perhaps more to our detriment, we allowed ourselves to believe this. Even as things like:

Yo-Yo Ma's #SongsOfComfort series. Starting March 13, 2020 — three days after the WHO declared a pandemic — he just started posting short cello performances from his living room. No production, no editing, no institutional backing. Bach suites, Dvořák, Appalachian folk songs. He said he was playing "for the people who are working to make things better." Millions watched. Other musicians started doing the same, tagging each other. It became this rolling, informal, global relay of musicians playing for strangers from their homes.

National Theatre at Home, April 2020 onward. The NT pivoted its NT Live archive to free weekly YouTube streams — starting with *One Man, Two Guvnors*. Fifteen million viewers in the first months, from 173 countries. Which by the way... was only possible because they'd spent years investing in "newfangled" infrastructure that many in the sector had questioned as expensive and niche. The "inefficient" long-term investment became the emergency broadcast system. It was also a system that happened

because an older artistic director listened to a young kid who thought it would be a good idea to broadcast live theatre.

Megan Steller and the driveway concerts, Melbourne. During Melbourne's 112-day lockdown - the longest in the world - this opera singer started performing full arias in driveways. Word spread. People started booking her to show up and sing outside their elderly parents' windows, for birthdays in isolation, for people who were just falling apart. She'd stand on the footpath in a gown and sing Puccini to someone weeping behind glass. It became a movement - other performers joined, other cities copied it. Completely grassroots, completely unfunded, born of devastation and beautiful to watch.

But let me get back to the downer...

In general, yet, I believe, *real* terms... Gen Z onward have very little interest in working the way older folks do. They don't seem to believe in the invisible values that older generations seem to have. They are completely *un*-willing to suspend their disbelief. They're not buying it. And I suspect that you're not buying it anymore either. The next generation of arts leaders has no interest in the way we did business. (the way we are still - many of us - doing it) And yet... we seem unwilling to let them imagine what a completely different infrastructure might look like. We want things to stay the same. We need things to be different.

[VOLUNTEERISM: How Love Became the Load-Bearing Wall](#)

Which brings us to the nicotine patch. Volunteerism. It's the thing that helped sustain our debilitating relationship with underfunding and under-remunerating. And the patch has lost its nicotine.

Here's what that actually looks like in numbers.

Love Is Not a Business Model

DECLINE OF VOLUNTEERING IN CANADA - STATISTICS CANADA SGVP, 2013-2023

Note: StatsCan SGVP excludes Yukon, NWT & Nunavut residents.

2013

Formal volunteer rate: 44%

2.0B hours

56,000

FTE equivalents donated to arts & culture orgs in 2013
— highest avg hours of any sector (120/yr)

2018

41%

1.7B hours

44% → 34%

Women's volunteer rate, 2018-2023
Total hours down by a third

2023

32%

1.2B hours

Top 10% held.

Everyone else disappeared. The broad base collapsed
while a shrinking core carries more.

-451,000

full-time job equivalents lost in a decade

-34%

Community coordination hours.
Public meeting participation: -40%

67%
CAN'T FIND NEW
VOLUNTEERS

51%
CAN'T RETAIN
VOLUNTEERS

35%
REDUCED PROGRAMS
OR SERVICES

17%
CANCELLED PROGRAMS
ENTIRELY

21%
REPORT EMPLOYEE
BURNOUT

Sources: Statistics Canada SGVP 2013, 2018, 2023 - CAPACODA - Imagine
Canada - Volunteer Canada

In 2013, 900,000 Canadians were volunteering in arts and culture organisations — contributing 107 million hours annually. The equivalent of 56,000 full-time jobs. And arts volunteers gave more hours per person than volunteers in any other sector in Canada — an average of 120 hours each per year.

That was the baseline. That was what the sector was already depending on before volunteer hours across Canada dropped 15% between 2013 and 2018 — this was *before* the pandemic hit and drove that decline to 40% over the decade. There has been no rebound.

We built this sector on the love of it. And then that love became load-bearing.

But to descend even further... the *other* thing happened. We began to understand that those of us working in the arts were also volunteering countless hours that subsidize the lack of money, labour and volunteer support flowing into our organizations ... hours that take many of us well above the mythical forty-hour work week and often below a living wage.

More Hours. Less Pay. Same Complexity.

ARTS & CULTURAL LEADERSHIP VS. GOVERNMENT & PRIVATE SECTOR - FOUR COUNTRIES

Arts / cultural sector Government / private equivalent



+32%

Hours worked by Canadian artists, 2019-2021.
Number of artists up only 13%.

80%

UK arts workers have considered leaving the sector.
~10% see leaders modelling sustainable hours.

45 hrs/wk

Australian arts workers, 60% want more hours —
because they can't make it viable at current pay.

74%

US museum workers can't always cover basic
living expenses, including 73% of full-time staff.

Same or greater complexity. Fewer resources. No safety net.

Sources: PayScale, Hill Strategies, Arts Professional, Creative Australia, Museums Moving Forward, 4-8 UK, The Reconnecting, Yalon 2026

So a sector running on 56,000 donated jobs (that appear to be shrinking annually) and untold hours of unpaid additional labour ... from many of us in this room... doesn't have a passion problem. We have a structural problem. And structural problems require structural thinking.

Let me repeat: we don't have a passion problem. We have a structural problem.

Love is not a business model. Like so many other aspects of life, love alone, cannot, will not, sustain creative artists and the realization of their work. We know this. And yet it needs to be said and then resaid. Love is not enough and any Gen Z will tell you this is true.

So it's worth asking: who are the volunteers in your organisation? And/or what are the hours that you are actually being paid for, and those that you are volunteering? What stops working tomorrow if volunteers stop showing up? What doesn't happen if you only showed up to work for the hours the board contracted you for?

The descent is complete. Our conditions are a downer. And so the question returns: are you open to naming/saying where you and your organization actually are? And are you willing to make changes? Or are you happier to keep going as you are?

An anecdote from my own experience in response to these questions: In 1998, (a moment in Canadian funding history that hit an ALL TIME LOW) I directed and created an adaptation of Fritz Lang's *Megatropolis* for the stage. At the time I was the artistic director of Buddies in Bad Times Theatre in Toronto and of Die In Debt Theatre (As you can see with the name of both companies... I have been thinking about this stuff for awhile) Anyway...the show was an enormous critical and box office success in the way

shows that sold out 200 seat theatres in Toronto could be at that time. Concurrent with our success was another little show called "The Overcoat" I use the word "little" jokingly, it was a very big cast show, not as large as Megatropolis, but big nonetheless. I left everything on the floor when I made Megatropolis. I still look back in awe that I got to be part of such an exciting moment of theatre creation. So...when the then legendary Festival Trans Ameriques came calling, along with the then legendary programmer and AD, Marie H el ene Falcon, and she said you must bring your show to our festival... we did what *so many organizations that only have 5% administrative energy left for everything else that isn't on the stage...* We dropped the ball. On the other hand, The Overcoat, that was being produced by Canadian Stage went instead... and has not had too many years since.... where some version of that show has not been onstage. Don't get me wrong...it's a great show. But our not going to the festival and grabbing a different future by the (whatever body part feels appropriate) had nothing to do with the quality of the work. And if I am honest it had nothing to do with a lack of funding opportunities. It had everything to do with me not being able to take Die in Debt seriously enough to care for the *whole enterprise* in the same way that I cared for the creation of the work. It's part of the reason I am so interested in understanding some of the structural things that hold us back now.

Owais. You're up!



SGS:

Act 2 - The Upper

New Models

Owais:

Some examples of shared models that have been successful.



Progress Lab in Vancouver started as a 7,000 square foot facility led by four independent companies who decided to share resources, build community, and run the place as a cooperative venture. It worked. They've since incorporated as their own organisation and added more resident companies.



Photo by Dahlia Katz. This image shows a moment from the play 1991, written and directed by Cole Lewis and presented by Why Not Theatre as part of the RISER Project.

The RISER Project in Toronto, created by Why Not Theatre and now expanding to Edmonton and Regina, took the idea further. RISER brings three to five independent productions together to work in rep, sharing the costs of venue, production, design, marketing, and box office. It's the best of a festival model with full tech and hands-on producing support. Artists go through a series of training sessions in different producing capacities: grants, fundraising, selling tickets. Senior companies offer mentorship and share resources like projectors, rehearsal space, and offices. The shift is from independent to interdependent. One of the first shows out of RISER Toronto was Mouthpiece by Quote Unquote Collective. They went on to win a bunch of Doras, the show got picked up for a remount by Nightwood Theatre, Jodie Foster saw it, it got adapted into a feature that went to TIFF, they went to LA, and then produced several more larger shows on their own. All without ever getting operating funding. And many of the artist-producers who went through RISER spoke to how lonely indie producing is, and how transformative it was to be part of a cohort.



This image depicts Meredith Potter receiving the 2014 Leonard McHardy and John Harvey Award for Outstanding Leadership in Administration in the performing arts.

Then there's the Meredith Potter model. Meredith was the producing and administrative force behind three successful companies simultaneously: Nova Dance, Peggy Baker Dance Projects, and Volcano Theatre. Each year she also had a Metcalf intern who got trained in producing from the best. All three companies got a valuable resource for a fraction of the cost of hiring their own full-time producer.

STRUCTURAL TOOL: THE IRON TRIANGLE

Any organisation navigating resource constraints is working inside an Iron Triangle: Quality, Speed, and Cost. You can optimize for any two, but not all three simultaneously. A high-quality, fast-moving organisation will cost more. A low-cost, high-quality organisation will move slowly. A fast, low-cost organisation will sacrifice quality. Most arts organisations have been pretending the triangle doesn't apply to them, or that love and dedication can substitute for one of the corners. It can't. The first structural act is naming which two corners you are actually optimising for, and what that means for the third.

New Money

For decades, we've operated inside a single financial logic: grants, a few donations and a couple of tickets. Maybe a gala. That's the menu. And it's a menu that was set in the 1960s.

But a few things have changed since the 60s. And some of the people who think most carefully about our sector have been paying attention. David Maggs, working as the Metcalf Foundation's Fellow on Arts and Society, has been asking a version of the same question we're asking tonight: what does a cultural sector do, and what should we do with a cultural sector? His work — particularly "Art and the World After This" and "Equipping the Future to Find the Art That It Needs" — names something essential. We need to increase our appetite for risk, strategise which risks we need to take, and structure our approach to taking them, so that we come out collectively ahead on the other side.

And there is something concrete arriving that makes this real. A few years ago the Government of Canada launched a \$755 million Social Finance Fund — this isn't grants. This is repayable investment capital designed for social purpose organisations. The Metcalf Foundation commissioned a report called "More Than Money" that maps out exactly how social finance could work for our sector — growing the pie, building organisational capacity, and diversifying revenue beyond the annual grant cycle. There is currently in the works a social finance fund focused just on repayable finance for the arts and culture sector.

Here's why this matters to everyone in this room. Social finance doesn't replace grants. It means an organisation with a solid plan and a clear social impact case can access capital that doesn't depend on the grant calendar. It means entrepreneurial thinking — the same thinking the ratio flip asks of us as individuals — can be applied at the organisational level. You need look no further than Lumel Studios and Gather and the way that organisation is incredibly mission-driven but with several strong revenue streams that sustain it. But they needed a lot of infrastructure in place to do that. Repayable capital for the arts could be the key to a whole new generation of Lumels. And it means the conversation about money shifts from "how do we get more of the same" to "how do we build something that works differently." There's our second flip.

[New Help](#)



AI generated image using Google Gemini Nano Banana 2, by Owais Lightwala. The image shows a South Asian man riding on a sled pulled by AI huskies against the backdrop of the Northern Lights and winter landscape of mountainous North.

While we're on the subject of the ways the world has changed, we need to talk about AI. Not the one in the headlines. The one already in your workflow — in your grant applications, in your social media, the one some of you are using quietly and some of you are avoiding with equal conviction.

Let's start with what it's not. I don't believe it's Ozempic. It will not do the hard work for you. You will still need to sit with hard questions and have difficult conversations with your board. The judgment that comes from years of practice will not be automated. It will not meditate for you. It will not grieve for you. It will not build the trust between a director and a board chair that makes governance actually function.

It's also not a fully neutral tool. The systems are built and owned by a small number of extraordinarily powerful corporations, trained on data that was often gathered without consent, encoding historical patterns that include racism, colonialism, and the systematic under-representation of exactly the artists and communities our sector is trying to centre. When we use AI to write our first drafts, we're working with a tool that has inherited all of that. That's all true.

And yet. It is going to change the way you work. Not in five years. Now. Already. The question is not whether you are for it or against it. The question is whether you're approaching it with the same critical intelligence you bring to every other tool in your practice.

A hammer is not neutral. It was designed to drive nails, which means it will shape what you build. The question is always: what am I building, and is this the right tool for it? Or, maybe, I'm building something, would a hammer be useful? What are all the things I could do with a hammer I could never do with my bare hands?

There has been a lot of ink spilled about the anxiety that AI will threaten creative livelihoods because it can draw, make music and render videos at a staggering pace. But, so far, three years into the revolution, we haven't seen the great replacement actually happen. Turns out humans like humans making art, that it's not just about cost, it's also about originality and relationship and meaning. We also don't seem to have reached the end limits of the human desire to create or to consume culture, and with every new technology that makes it easier to do so — whether that's pen and paper, the printing press, the internet, or as of yesterday Nano Banana 2, Gemini's newest image model — is met with equal appetite by more and more people who want to create and share and experience.

That said, what is changing most quickly is all the labour that goes around the making and sustaining of art in the background. For every hour spent in the rehearsal hall or on stage we spend ten in our office fighting with the Canada Council portal or doing the fourteenth revision of the budget, or trying to come up with a new thing to post a reel about so we can get more followers on the Instagram account. All of this “knowledge work” is changing by the minute with AI. For organisations that have been running on volunteerism, this is potentially a real rebalancing of where human energy goes.

I'm really excited about this opportunity. I know the current limitation is burnout — feeling like there's no time in the day to stop the incessant task list and try something completely new. It's a bit like onboarding a new staff member. Short-term, it takes longer. You have to show them how things work, build their context, train them in your values. But you know the trade-off. Long-term, you gain capacity you never had. We're going to have to make space for short-term investment for long-term gain.

This also means we're all going to be managers now. Managers of AI agents, bots, tools that can do things for us. Someone has to tell them what good looks like. Someone has to give them a job and follow up. If you've managed people, you know there's a finite number of direct reports one person can handle. But you also know that a person with a team of ten working for them has more capacity than a person with none.

Remember everything I just said about visionaries vs managers, maybe you can do both now because you have a team of ten now... or maybe you still hate that part and the ratios need flipping for you.

That's where we are.

[THE PANARCHY MODEL: Where We Are in the Cycle](#)

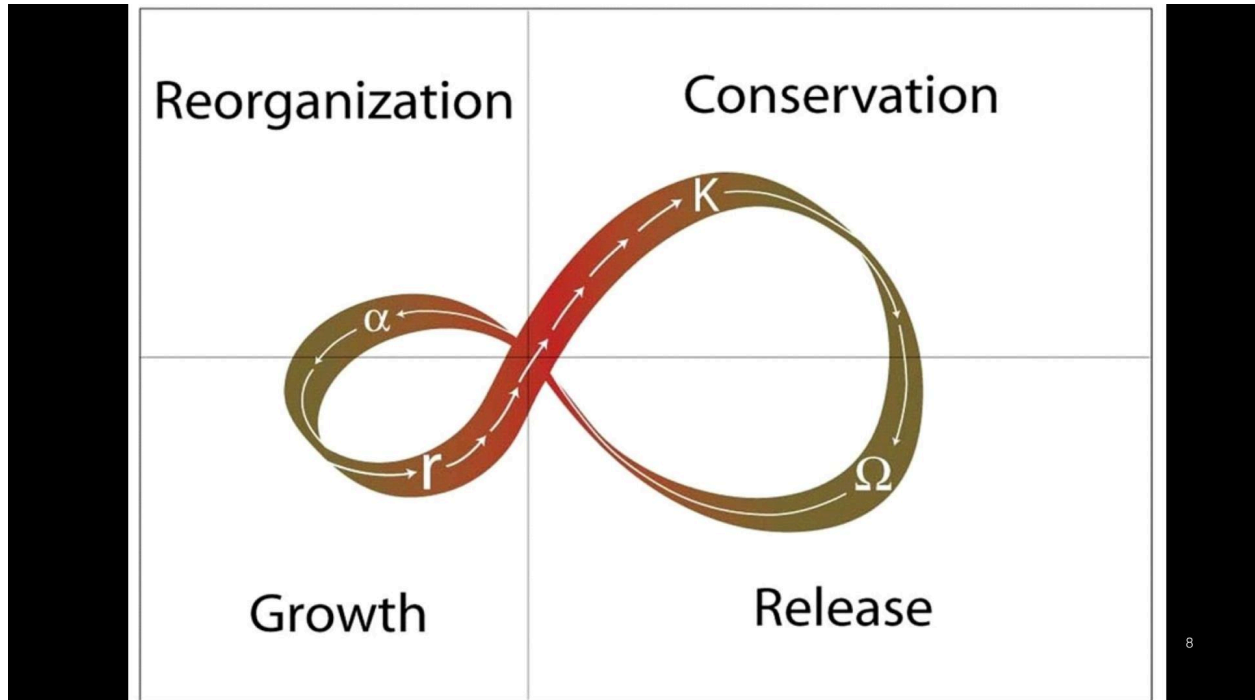


Image from "Panarchy: Discontinuities Reveal Similarities in the Dynamic System Structure of Ecological and Social Systems," by A. Garmestani, et al., 2009, *Ecology and Society*. Copyright by JSTOR.

We want to offer you one more frame before we move to recombining. It comes from ecology, not from business, and it might be the most useful lens we have for understanding where the arts sector actually sits right now.

It's called Panarchy. Developed by Lance Gunderson and C.S. Holling, it describes how complex systems — ecosystems, economies, societies — move through adaptive cycles. Four phases: growth and exploitation, conservation, release, and reorganisation.

In the growth phase, new organisations colonise open territory — think of the explosion of small companies and collectives in the 1970s and 80s. In the conservation phase, the system accumulates resources and stability but becomes increasingly rigid — think of the arts funding infrastructure as it calcified through the 2000s and 2010s, where the same organisations received the same grants in the same patterns year after year. Connectedness increases. Flexibility decreases. The system becomes brittle.

Then comes release. A disturbance the system can't absorb. COVID was one. The volunteer collapse is another. The generational shift in who wants to lead arts organisations and on what terms is a third. Resources are liberated. Institutional models rupture. The status quo becomes fragile and unstable.

And then — and this is where we are — comes reorganisation. The alpha phase. Rapid reorganisation leading to renewal. Windows of opportunity for innovation open. The system doesn't return to what it was. It recombines.

What's powerful about the Panarchy model is that it tells us something we intuitively know but rarely name: the release phase isn't the end. It's the precondition for what comes next. The rupture we described in Act 1 isn't a disaster to be survived. It's a phase to be navigated with intention. And the danger isn't the release itself. The danger is getting stuck in what the model calls a poverty trap — where potential, connectedness, and resilience are all low, and the system can't innovate its way forward. Or a rigidity trap — where we try to rebuild the same structures that became brittle in the first place.

One place I find particularly clear the application of this theory is how we've changed our approach to forest fires. We used to fear them and tried very hard to stop them. But without any fires, there can't be the release of the old growth canopy that is blocking the light, and after the fire new saplings can take root. They grow quickly at first, as young plants do, and then eventually mature and slow down. Nowadays we do controlled burns because we know the value of the rupture and the reorganisation.

The Panarchy model also tells us that systems are nested. What happens at the level of an individual organisation is connected to what happens at the sector level, which is connected to what happens at the level of national cultural policy. A small, fast cycle — a single company rethinking its operations or going through a succession from a founder to next gen — can trigger what the model calls a “revolt” upward. And the larger, slower cycle — sector-wide norms, funding structures — provides the “memory” that shapes how smaller cycles reorganise. There's a lot more we can do with this model but in the interest of time this is the gist of it.

Where do we think we are? As a sector? In your org? If we're at the stage of rupture, then what are we reorganising toward?

STRUCTURAL TOOL: THE ADAPTIVE CYCLE

The Panarchy adaptive cycle has four phases: r (growth/exploitation) → K (conservation/rigidity) → Ω (release/collapse) → α (reorganisation/renewal). The Canadian arts sector has moved through a long K phase of accumulated but increasingly rigid infrastructure, into an Ω phase triggered by COVID, volunteer collapse, and generational change. We are now in α — the reorganisation phase. This is the phase with the greatest opportunity for innovation but also the greatest vulnerability to poverty traps (where nothing new can grow) and rigidity traps (where we rebuild what already failed). The question is not whether to change but what to reorganise toward.

OWAIS:

Act 3 - The Recombination

SGS:

When the National Arts Centre moved towards the creation of the Indigenous Theatre Department, its progress was led by a simple refrain that I employed when met with internal concerns. I would say: "It might be better." That was it. Not "it will be better." Not "it has to be better." Just: "it might be". It helped a lot.

We often believe change will be worse. We privilege the story of the diver who belly-flops off the high board and build caution around her. We construct entire risk-aversion frameworks around the possibility that someone *will* get hurt. And that's not wrong... people do get hurt.

But it only happens about half the time. The other half? Glorious. People making it safely off the high diving board. Some people do land clean. We can't make change- we can't build a sector that actually evolves - by always privileging the diver who belly-flops. Because not all divers do.

"It might be better" is not hedging. It just holds both possibilities at once — the risk and the reward — without collapsing into either magical thinking *or* paralysis. It says: we don't know for certain, but we're going to move anyway, because the alternative is standing on top of the diving board forever.

Recombining is a biological metaphor. In genetics, recombination is what happens when two strands of DNA cross over each other during cell division, exchanging segments, creating something that carries the inheritance of both parents but is identical to neither. It's neither a mutation or a copy, it's actually an intentional exchange that produces novelty from existing material.

So here are 3 novel thoughts:

Number 1: **Audiences at the Centre**

Owais:

When we started writing the Manifesto for Now essay series, one of the driving ideas was the notion of art being made for audiences rather than for artists' sake. We got some heat for that. But we think it's essential here.

For me, recombining starts with the audience at the centre. Not the organisation. Not the institution. Not the funder. The human being who walks in the door — or logs on, or shows up at the community hall — with a creative compulsion and a community they're accountable to.

When organisations lose that — when they become self-perpetuating structures whose primary goal is their own survival — something essential has left the room. The Panarchy model would call that the rigidity trap: a system so focused on conserving itself that it can no longer adapt to the world it's supposed to serve.

Putting audiences at the centre is not a marketing strategy. It's a structural reorientation. It means every decision — programming, governance, pricing, accessibility, the shape of the building, the time the show starts — gets asked through the lens of: who is this for, and does it actually serve them?

It also means accepting that the audience has changed. That “them” is not the same “them” it was twenty years ago. And that an organisation built for one audience may need to recombine to serve another — not by abandoning its artistic DNA, but by letting that DNA cross over with the reality of who is actually in the community.

This is the first process: recombine around the people you serve, not around the structures that served you.

Number 2: **Dramaturgy as cultural translation**

SGS:

Dramaturgy is a skill that can and should extend beyond the rehearsal room and the artist studio.

Dramaturgy. The practice of asking: what does this work actually need? What is serving the story and what is getting in the way? What does the audience need to understand in order to receive what the artist is trying to give them?

That skill, the ability to stand between a complex body of knowledge and a community that needs to receive it, and to translate between them, is another way of describing dramaturgy.

Our work on "Create Canada" a public thinking and writing project we made leading up to the last election was an offshoot of this impulse.

What if dramaturgy, as a discipline, as a professional skill, as a way of thinking — became one of the core roles within our sector. Rather than relegating it to creation work and the transmission of the creative work... What if these skills were applied to organizational vitality, to understanding how to navigate the rate of change, to interpreting AI Agentic workflows for our organizations?

This is itself a *Recombining*. The same skill, redirected. The same DNA, crossed over into a new context. It doesn't replace the dramaturg in the rehearsal room. It extends the reach of what dramaturgical thinking can do

This might be pointing towards less creative output, using more traditional definitions of creative output, like less shows, and reallocating resources to create *possibly* better ways of doing the work we love. And by better, in this context, I mean with health, well being and happiness. We are in the midst of a language shift. AI will change everything (even if we never engage) it will change everything around us. Shifting your work or the work of a dramaturg to focus on this change *might be better*.

Number 3: **Recombining**

OWAIS:

If volunteerism is the load-bearing wall, and if the wall is cracking, the answer is not to find more volunteers. The answer might be to rebuild the ship. Maybe even incorporate wood from other ships to build a new stronger ship

SGS:

Yvette Nolan - someone many of you will remember from these here parts has lots to say about governance and one of the key problems we see...is the "rinse and repeat" of boards and the sheer volume of willing volunteers this eats away at. What if the governance work that currently exhausts a handful of loyal people was shared across organisations? Shared boards, shared administrative infrastructure, shared back-office capacity? So that the same small community isn't being asked to hold up ten separate roofs at once?

Forgive me if you've heard this one before...

There's an old European folk tale about a hungry traveller arriving in a village and announces they're going to make soup from a stone. The villagers are curious and skeptical. As the soup "cooks," the traveller suggests that it would be even better with a few carrots — and someone produces carrots. Then a bit of potato. Then some onion. Each villager contributes something small, and together they create a feast that feeds everyone. The stone was never the ingredient; it was the catalyst.

Nobody would have pooled their resources if asked directly... but the pronouncement... let's make soup!...the shared curiosity, even the skepticism, made it possible. What improbable idea can you enter the square with?

PROVOCATION & INVITATION

OWAIS:

We want to leave you with three questions — not to answer now, but to carry into the next two days.

SGS:

What is the one structural challenge in your organisation — or in the sector around you — that you have never named out loud in a room like this? Why haven't you named it? What would happen if you did?

OWAIS:

Where is the ratio flip happening in your work — the moment where the skills that made you successful are not the skills the next phase requires? What would it take to develop those skills, or to find the person who has them?

SGS:

And finally...What might a successful cultural sector in Yukon look and feel like, fifty years from now?

APPENDIX: Reference Points & Structural Tools

The Iron Triangle

A project management concept applicable to any resource-constrained organisation. The three corners are Quality, Speed, and Cost. The constraint is that you can optimize for any two, but not all three simultaneously. Most arts organisations have been implicitly optimising for two corners, often Quality and some version of Consistency, while absorbing the cost of the third corner through volunteer labour, staff overwork, or deferred infrastructure investment.

The Panarchy Adaptive Cycle

Developed by Lance H. Gunderson and C.S. Holling in *Panarchy: Understanding Transformations in Human and Natural Systems* (Island Press, 2002), the adaptive cycle describes how complex systems move through four phases: r (growth/exploitation), K (conservation), Ω (release), and α (reorganisation). Systems are nested: what happens at the level of a single organisation is connected to sector-wide dynamics, which are connected to national policy. Key concepts: the “revolt” function (small, fast changes triggering larger shifts) and the “remember” function (larger, slower systems providing memory for reorganisation). The danger zones: poverty traps (low potential, low resilience) and rigidity traps (high connectedness, no room for innovation).

Further reading: Resilience Alliance, <https://www.resalliance.org/panarchy>

Social Finance Landscape

Canada’s \$755 million Social Finance Fund was launched in May 2023 and is managed by three fund managers: Realize Capital Partners (a joint venture between Rally Assets and Relay Ventures), Boann Social Impact, and Fonds de finance sociale – CAP Finance. The Fund provides repayable investment capital to social purpose organisations over a 10-year horizon, with \$400 million deployed in the first five years and an expectation of leveraging up to \$800 million in additional private investment.

Key reports and resources:

David Maggs, *Art and the World After This* (Metcalf Foundation, 2021).
<https://metcalffoundation.com/publication/art-and-the-world-after-this/>

David Maggs, “Equipping the Future to Find the Art That It Needs: Five Questions on the Future of Cultural Nonprofits” (Metcalf Foundation, 2023).
<https://metcalffoundation.com/metcalf-story/five-questions-on-the-future-of-cultural-nonprofits/>

David Maggs, “The Money We Need” (Metcalf Foundation, 2025).
<https://metcalffoundation.com/metcalf-story/the-money-we-need/>

Elizabeth MacKinnon and Christine Pellerin, More Than Money: How Social Finance Can Build Resilience in the Arts Sector (Metcalf Foundation, 2018).
<https://metcalffoundation.com/publication/more-than-money/>

Figurative (formerly Arts & Culture Finance at Nesta), Setting the Stage: A Guide to Developing Impact Investment for Cultural and Creative Sectors.
<https://figurative.org.uk/>

Government of Canada, Social Finance Fund.
<https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/social-innovation-social-finance/social-finance-fund.html>

The Metcalf Foundation’s Staging Change program focuses on developing adaptive leadership capacity within the performing arts sector.
<https://metcalffoundation.com/programs/performing-arts/>

From Manifesto for Now and Create Canada

Manifesto for Now (<https://manifestofornow.com>) is an ongoing essay series by Owais Lightwala and Sarah Garton Stanley, launched in April 2023, built around ten provocations addressing the current crises in Canada’s performing arts sector. The essays argue for structural change in how the sector operates, including the proposition that art is for audiences first, that organisations must stop privileging self-preservation over service, and that the sector’s relationship to risk, money, and governance needs fundamental rethinking. The essays informed much of the thinking in this keynote.

Create Canada (<https://createcanada.ca>) is a public thinking and policy project by Lightwala, Stanley, and David Maggs, developed in advance of the 2025 federal election. Create Canada makes the case that the 1951 Massey Commission, which

established the foundational architecture of Canadian cultural policy, is long overdue for reimagining. The project proposes concrete policy ideas, including the Canada Culture Pass, a universal annual benefit providing direct access to cultural experiences for every Canadian. Create Canada contends that investing in arts and culture is investing in social cohesion, civic participation, and national identity.

Dramaturgy as Knowledge Translation

Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas, *What is Dramaturgy?* Source for the definition of dramaturgy as a practice that contextualizes a work and establishes connections among text, artists, and audience. <https://lmda.org/what-is-dramaturgy>

Canadian Institutes of Health Research, *Knowledge Translation at CIHR*. Source for the definition of knowledge translation as a dynamic and iterative process involving the synthesis, dissemination, exchange, and ethically sound application of knowledge. <https://cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/48802.html>

National Collaborating Centre for Methods and Tools, *Evidence-Informed Public Health*. Source for the framing of evidence-informed decision-making in public health as the process of distilling, disseminating, and applying the best available evidence in practice and policy. <https://www.nccmt.ca/tools/eiph>

OECD, *OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions 2024 Results*. Source for the argument that trust in public institutions is shaped in part by evidence-based decision-making and how clearly governments communicate the data and rationale behind reforms. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-survey-on-drivers-of-trust-in-public-institutions-2024-results_9a20554b-en.html

Volunteerism Data Sources

Hill Strategies Research, *Volunteers and Donors in Arts and Culture Organizations in Canada in 2013* (Statistical Insights on the Arts, Vol. 12, No. 3). Source for 900,000 volunteers, 107 million hours, 56,000 full-time job equivalents, and 120 hours per volunteer average.

<https://hillstrategies.com/resource/volunteers-and-donors-in-arts-and-culture-organizations-in-canada-in-2013/>

Statistics Canada, The Daily: Volunteering and Charitable Giving in Canada, 2018 to 2023 (June 2025). Source for the overall decline in formal volunteering from 44% (2013) to 41% (2018) to 32% (2023), and the drop in total volunteer hours from 2.0 billion (2013) to 1.7 billion (2018) to 1.2 billion (2023), a 40% decline over the decade.
<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/250623/dq250623b-eng.htm>

Imagine Canada, analysis of the Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating (2023).
<https://imaginecanada.ca/en/360/new-results-statistics-canadas-survey-giving-volunteering-and-participating>

Jane Marsland, Shared Platforms and Charitable Venture Organizations: A Powerful Possibility for a More Resilient Arts Sector (Metcalf Foundation, 2013).
<https://metcalffoundation.com/publication/shared-platforms-and-charitable-venture-organizations-a-powerful-possibility-for-a-more-resilient-arts-sector-2/>

Arts BC Shared Services Program, funded by Canada Council Cultivate Grant.