

**Hong Kong Arts Development Council
International Arts Leadership Roundtable 2017**

**Full Transcript of
Panel Discussion of Plenary 2: Applying Technology in the Arts**

Moderator: **Dr. Isaac LEUNG (Assistant Professor, The Department of Cultural and Creative Arts, The Education University of Hong Kong; Chairman, Videotage [Hong Kong])**

Panellists:

- 1) Mr. Simon BRAULT (Director & CEO, Canada Council for the Arts)**
- 2) Dr. Bryan Wai-ching CHUNG (Associate Professor, Academy of Visual Arts, Hong Kong Baptist University)**
- 3) Mr. Andy STRATFORD (Managing Director, FutureEverything [UK])**

Isaac LEUNG: Thanks for the really insightful speeches. This is quite challenging for us to summarise this panel because our three speakers are focusing on entirely different things about technology. Let me just try to summarise a little bit.

Mr. Stratford talked about how technology could really enable citizen to participate and contribute to society. Mr. Brault talked about the structural changes of society which actually deals with funding, management system, how we interact, and also ultimately how our behaviours and our mind set change. Dr. Chung invited us to look at history again, which is a very intellectual discussion about media archaeology, which in a sense that a lot of academics in new media art are doing. And he talks about the notion of illusion and ultimately talked about interfaces, networks, perceptions and values.

I just want to throw some keywords here, so that we can actually start our discussion: globalisation; internationalisation and localisation; funding; management strategies; collaboration particularly with non-art sectors; Application Programme Interface (API) which leads to the notion of data; and humanistic approach of technology which leads to the idea of values; and education impact. Ultimately, we talk about disruptions, which I think is the kind of major word, the keyword that we are all concerned about.

Let me just start by asking the first question. The first question is what is actually the landscape of our funding system in this radically changing

environment? For FutureEverything, I know that most of your funding comes from [Creative Europe](#) (the European Commission's framework programme for support to the culture and audio-visual sectors). You are dealing with Brexit so how are you going to get funding later? And then you also have another project called [FAULT LINES](#), which dramatically thinks about our organisations' works of not only presenting programmes, but actually commissioning new generation of artist or non-artist to produce new works and bring to society.

Meanwhile, the Canada Council for the Arts (the Canada Council) is doing innovative works. I actually read through your Council's whole manifesto of the digital art initiative. The manifesto has a lot of really great words there, including collaboration, networking, relevancy, impact, and ultimately talks about organisational structure and leadership style, which is not only about what the ultimate programme looks like, but also how art organisations are managing their own institution. Your Council is specifically funding or encouraging art organisations to disrupt themselves, which I think is very important.

As for Dr. Chung, I am sure you have a lot of experiences in getting funding from the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC) or from the commercial sectors. I think, as creator or artist, we have to deal with different funding systems or landscapes. So, first of all, I would like to get some insights from you all about money.

Andy
STRATFORD:

In any case, we have been looking at alternative partners for a number of years and I think the idea that you can only rely on an arts council to provide research and development (R&D) funding, and then you've got corporate social responsibility. So all those things have been there for a long time and we wanted to try something different.

Artists are the best innovators and if you can take that to the technology companies in the right context, then I think we can find some very interesting new avenues for potentially no-strings-attached arts funding. It is a difficult line to tread and it is a fault line, which is why our programme is called FAULT LINES. It is something we have been exploring for the last year and the programme has another 15 months to run.

Isaac LEUNG:

No-string-attached funding, that is the key word. Mr. Brault, what is your response to that?

Simon BRAULT:

I guess the question is the never-ending discussion on money and the arts. I think in Canada, because we are in this situation as an arts council, that the investment by the government which never happened before in 60 years, is radical and major. It also means that we will not have any excuse if we do not succeed to do something else at the end of it, because not having money is not the excuse.

So I guess the question now is where do you put the money? Where a public investment will have the best, the most leverage impact? And It is fascinating to realise that for a lot of politicians and a lot of people running private foundations, they have this notion or this idea that digital gives the possibility of doing fabulous things incidentally. And it is not true. It is not true because digital changes the way we distribute, the way we produce magic, but the time needed to create something significant, the time needed to develop a scenario, the time needed to write the right novel or the poem and all of that is not very different. It is the same amount of time more or less as it was hundreds years ago.

So this question of what kind of time do we buy, because we are in the business of arts funder, we are in the business of buying time, meaningful time, for artist to master and develop and come to a point where their work will be significant, and where they are being distributed through digital. Especially in a world where most of what is presented towards all the channels is crap, It is not good. So the question of why do we invest, how do we do that. And it means a lot of changes. For us, it meant that we went from 146 programmes to six programmes at the Canada Council. We went with the idea that, in the future, we do not want to spend 80 % of our money in core funding to fund core institutions. We need more money for projects. Like all our Digital Strategy Fund is only project driven. Anyone, any artist, any organisation can apply for that fund but it has to be a project and it has to have a beginning and an end, which is not the case, by definition, for core funding.

So we realised that if we want to be able to really sustain the arts in a digital environment, we need to take care as public funder of components of the system that nobody is interested in taking care of. And because now there is a complete disconnection between the distribution of the artists and the productions and distribution system that digital is producing, it is becoming absolutely essential that it is done. And that is why it is with great dismay that I am observing a lot of strategies for digital strategy all over the world that do not take as an essential consideration the question of remuneration of the artists.

Isaac LEUNG: Just a quick question--referring to the talk about impact and measurements in Plenary 1 earlier, does the Canada Council have new metrics for this initiative?

Simon BRAULT: Yes, the way we decided, and we pay a lot of attention right now to measurement, but one very fundamental and very radical decision we took was that we, as a public funder, would do the measurement. We would not put the burden on the artist or the artistic organisation. Because in other jurisdictions we saw the artist or the artistic organisation kind of tailored their project in order to tick the boxes of measurement. So what we did is

we reconstruct when we took all the programmes and streamlined to six programmes. We built logic model, being very clear of what are the expected outcomes -- long-term, mid-term, short-term -- and a few key indicators that are quantitative and qualitative.

And right now we are developing capacities and research at the Canada Council in order to be able to track that. So there are ways to do that. You ask for final reports. We are not there yet, but what we want eventually is to take all the final reports of the thousands of artists and organisations that we support to work with the data, in order to produce not only an interesting narrative but also evidence that whether such system works or not. So for us it is an obsession, but it is not an obsession that we want to transfer to the artist or to the artistic organisation because it will format their work. And the last thing we want to do in the future is to have a funding model that is prescriptive. And I think our funding models in the past were very prescriptive. We were expecting something, and people were trying to produce that. I think we need to change that approach.

Isaac LEUNG: How do you encourage collaboration?

Simon BRAULT: It is simple, because with the digital, part of the criteria to assess a project includes what is the level of cooperation, what is the level of collaboration, how open is your project, how shareable and scalable is your project. So if you come alone and you say, "Okay, I want to do something to sell more of my products in my museum", we will say no. It is not because it is not interesting, but because it is not transformative for the sector, it is not transformative beyond your own organisation, It is too self-serving, it is too narrow, so you can apply elsewhere but this is not what we will support. So we are very clear on what type of an approach we would like to see and support.

Bryan Wai-ching CHUNG: Being an artist, I am actually quite familiar with all the purchasing in Hong Kong. Also, I noticed a lot of the prominent or active media artists in Hong Kong actually came from two sectors: design industry and education sector. It is close to impossible for us to survive as a pure media artist without doing something else. For me, I actually do a lot of research developments that come from university and also I received the pay cheque from my boss every month.

And my other comment is about the idea of digital or technology. I once saw a documentary about the making of some of the Chemical Brothers' music videos. The director claimed they are doing experimental film so they used the LED light and poured some liquid on top of the speaker, which is extremely low tech. They explained that if they wanted to use computer animation instead, that would cost them maybe three to five times more in order to produce the animation. So, this is a little bit contrary to our understanding. At the very beginning, we thought that digital technology

would hugely enhance productivity, but then the cost of hiring human resources to create the desired effect may end up forcing you to revert to low tech methods.

I also want to share my personal experience: I owned a start-up company a few years ago. At the very beginning we usually had a budget of HKD \$300,000 to 400,000 for augmented reality (AR) works. Then, we witnessed an annual decrease of the budget, and up to now, when my students pitch for AR jobs, they are actually looking for something like one-tenth of the budget we had before. However, to advertisement agencies, it is still much cheaper to hire a few part-time workers to put up a booth and then upload a few images to Facebook, rather than commissioning artists to work on a new media art or interactive project. This scenario is not uncommon in Hong Kong, as well as the decline in current spending and production costs.

Isaac LEUNG: As an artist, could you give us some quick tips? As a media artist, it takes a lot of money and time to do R&D. How should arts councils change the funding system in order to benefit media artists like you?

Bryan CHUNG: I have a few successful cases and a lot of failed cases. I think one of the key things is that in research and development, the outcome may not be necessarily concretely deliverable. So it cannot be measured and assessed easily with key performance indicators (KPIs), and this is one of the things we can explore whether suitable measurement can be developed.

And another point is the infrastructure support that I mentioned in my talk. We may not rely solely on corporate or government funding. Like the case of Mecca Bay and similar organisations, they actually built a grassroots or bottom-up support for artist and practitioner. Meanwhile, there are quite a lot of open source software developers in the area I work, and they are willing to moonlight and distribute their works for free. I am actually doing so with the support from my boss for feedback into this particular system. I personally benefit from the open source community across the world and I give my contribution in return. In this sense, we are gradually building up a sort of ecology. For the public funders, they can also consider providing some sort of initiatives for such kind of organisation to survive and to live on.

Andy STRATFORD: I think it would be really great for organisations like the arts councils in the UK and maybe Hong Kong Arts Development Council to take a very proactive role in brokerage with organisations that are not just doing art support on a corporate social responsibility basis but are actually some of the other companies that could perhaps benefit from artists working with them because artists have so much to offer, and I think helping to brokerage some of those connections would be an amazing thing to happen.

Isaac LEUNG: Before we open up to audience question, after talking about money, I would like to talk about values. I think one thing that is coming from you all is that technology is not just something like a fancy spectacle but also its humanistic approach which you all mentioned a lot. One word that caught my attention is the word "trust", which I think is also like a major word in the 21st century. Dr. Wong (Chairman of HKADC) was talking about we are going to be threatened by Artificial Intelligence (AI), but on the one hand, we use dating apps, meet strangers and then fall in love. In the meantime, we also have fake news online. So what do you all think about the core values or how do you represent or kind of manifest the idea of trust in a programme?

Simon BRAULT: It is a very good question and in fact I realised some months ago, maybe three months before we hosted the Arts in a Digital World Summit in March 2017, a very special summit as we invited people from all across Canada, artists of completely diversity with people from indigenous descent and all of that. The more we were approaching that summit, the more I realised that we needed to be clear on what the values are, what our framework is. Because there were fears within the community that all of that would commercialise or instrumentalise the arts, or move from a position of valuing the arts to valuing cultural export. So there was a lot of confusion. And even for us, we realised that our legal mandate developed 65 years ago was not really debating those questions.

When the Canada Council was created, it was after the Second World War and it was created around the question of enlightening, the question of making sure that people would enjoy the arts, that education would become important. All those ideas were very important and are still important, but they were not clear enough or precise enough or contextualised enough for us to be able to have that discussion. So I started to work on that manifesto just to say "this is where we are" and I was not saying that this is the end of the world but I needed to say at the very beginning of that summit, "this is where, as the CEO of the Canada Council, I stand from a value point of view", and opened then the discussion. And it has been very interesting because I realised, while working on it, that those questions are fundamental because why would you give money to so and so if it is not only for art for art sake. If it is not, so why would you do that? What do you try to protect? What do you try to enhance? What do you try to advance? And while doing that, I realised that digital could give us the opportunity to redefine and lay a foundation of our discourse about the importance of arts in society.

And I think that it is as fundamental as that. Personally, this is where I am right now. I think that we need new arguments, we need a new way and we need also new people in the conversation and we need to be able to talk with you where there is an incredible deficit of attention. I mean, nobody wants to hear long arguments, but they want to have things that are

relevant. So I think it is time for us, for in the art sector, and that is probably the topic of another long panel or session, but the question of whether we can come with a new, refreshed approach to explain the role of the arts in our society, why we need it more than ever before, is the question we need to answer?

And I think again, as I said that, the discourse I hear most of the time is 50 years old. We have examples that are more recent but most of the arguments are 50 years old and I think we need to make a leap and go somewhere else. And it should be grounded on this question of what is the place of the human being. Especially with the artificial intelligence, what is the place of the human in all the configurations?

Andy
STRATFORD:

Well, maybe it should be the Internet of Humans, not the Internet of Things (IoT). As Mr. Brault said, art is the proof that technology is not enough. We have to trust -- you talked about trust. I mean, trust is a chameleon concept. It means so many different things to different people. And it shifts and changes its shape and its colour depending upon where you are sat at any particular moment.

So even defining what trust is and what it means can be extremely difficult. And that is something that I think there is going to be a lot of grappling with over the next few years. There was a very interesting study on an intercontinental basis done right across the regions of the world on whether people believe that their data was safe. I think the figure was 53 % in this region of Asia thought it was not and in Europe 65 % thought it was not. But nowhere in the world did -- everywhere in the world more than 50 % of people believed their data was not secure.

So that is a fundamental problem and something that I think needs addressing by the technology companies. I think that is a technological problem but it also becomes a societal problem.

Bryan Wai-ching
CHUNG:

I guess it is quite difficult to leave it to Google to protect our privacy. I think in computer science we usually describe computer as a black box, which means you do not understand what is happening inside, so you can only see the input and the output, and trying to make sense of what is happening in that particular box. And this type of model actually become bigger and bigger with AI and algorithms. We actually do not know what is or are happening inside the calculations and computations. As long as something comes out and we are not too upset by it, we usually would just leave it there without asking. I think the algorithm is actually computing our life. I came across an article that there is an AI algorithm that would try to classify our political view, that you are a little bit too radical just because of your face perhaps slightly similar to someone who is a little bit radical; And we are a little bit liberal or conservative, by this kind of classification of human being, based on facial appearances and some AI technology.

So, as a media artist, I try to approach such issue in two different ways. The first type of project I work on is the employment of technology for some particular idea or concept, and that one will not touch too much on the ideology of political assumption about the technologies. Second, when I am working with technology, I try to question or ask whether we have some kind of cultural assumptions about using that particular technology, especially like the IoT and AI. There are popular terms we use often, but we do not have much understanding about them. Actually, according to some documentaries I watched earlier, Google is trying to digitise a lot of books without any consent from the authors and then put them online. I guess it may not be possible to solely rely on the discipline of those companies, but that there should be some sort of regulatory bodies to enforce something for check-and-balance.

Isaac LEUNG: We have five minutes left. So shall we open the floor and let's grab a chance to ask our experts about issues that are dealing with our future.

1st question from the audience: Thank you. A really great discussion. I would be interested to ask the panel, what does life look like beyond digital? The focus is on digital, which has now been around for quite some time, and I know we have referenced augmented reality and artificial intelligence and a couple of other concepts. But is there a big idea that is emerging that is way beyond digital? And, Mr. Brault, is that something that the next fund might anticipate at the Canada Council?

Simon BRAULT: It is a good question. When I submitted the idea of that fund to the treasury board, I talked about a fund for transition and made the argument that we know now that it is digital and maybe ten years from now it will be climate change or refugees in Canada, we do not exactly know, but we know for certain that the fact that public funders like the Canada Council were not equipped some years ago in order to help the sector, to support the sector to adapt to a change of civilisation, or a profound change of society, resulting in the entire sector lagging behind and struggling to survive and to stay relevant.

So I do not know what the future will be. Nobody knows. But for certain, the question of self-control that we have in our life is the big question. It is fascinating and everybody talks about those cars without drivers and when you read a lot about it--everybody talks about it, but when you read more, you realise that a lot of money goes into it and the money that goes into it is because the companies are not interested in moving people around, they are interested in where those cars will stop because they have all the algorithms to know that. If you like Starbuck Coffee, those cars will stop exactly at the hour you want to go, according to your habits, and that will generate a lot of money.

So the question of what will be our capacity in the near future to make our own decision? What will be the capacity for us of living a life, having a trajectory for the future that is not completely predetermined by your past habit—this is the big question. The question of diversity becomes a huge question because we know that the bubble effect is so strong that even if in theory we have access to everything, we are more and more limited by the impact of the algorithms in terms of the offer. So those questions that are in fact fundamental cultural questions are -- we do not know exactly what the form will be but we know that it is progressing at a pace that is incredible, and that makes certain that human beings need to develop their critical thinking more than ever. They need more than ever to have some agency. And this may be where arts and culture could contribute a lot to do that. But it will be a fight. And it is not enough now to present something that is nice, beautiful, interesting. But I think it will become a real combat, a real battle.

Andy
STRATFORD:

I absolutely agree. Arts provide that critical thinking, critical dimension. A last thought from me, can you put an algorithm on trial? An algorithm does harm to somebody. Can it be put on trial? What is the legal status of an algorithm? So there is a lot of questions that we, as artists, that we as thinkers, we as producers, we as intermediaries can help with and we can help both society and the technology industry address those questions.

Isaac LEUNG:

Yes, just a quick response, about like Google car. I think it is really ultimately about cultural philosophical issues. There is a really famous academic in Israel talking about if a Google car in the future encounters an accident; If you turn left, it will kill ten people; If you turn right, it will kill yourself. Then by the time when you buy the car, you have to think about the kind of person you are. Are you the kind of person who wants to kill yourself or kill ten people if there is an accident? So this is becoming a really important ethical question when you are making a decision to buy the product.

Andy
STRATFORD:

And you will only buy it if you trust it.

Isaac LEUNG:

Yes, exactly. Thank you very much for our speakers today, and I am sure this topic will be continued next year.

~ END ~