

Crowdfunding and the Arts: A Panel Discussion

Co-hosted by ELAN and Studio XX

March 29, 2014, 2-4 PM at Studio XX (#201, 4001 rue Berri, Montreal)



Participants:

Miranda Campbell is a professor of English at Dawson College. Her book, *Out of the Basement: Youth Cultural Production in Practice and in Policy* (McGill-Queens University Press, 2013) maps the characteristics and policy implications of youth small-scale self-generated creative work. Her current research focuses on labour issues in the creative industries, in part examining what policies and funding models enable and constrict youth cultural production. She profiles the stories, frustrations, successes, and issues related to youth creative work at www.everydaywerehustling.com.

Elza Kephart is a graduate of Emerson College and the [Canadian Film Center's](#) Director's Lab. Elza directed her first feature film at 24. *Graveyard Alive – A Zombie Nurse in Love* played in over 20 international film festivals, garnering the Kodak Cinematography Award at the Slamdance Film Festival in 2004. Her second feature, *Go in the Wilderness*, retells the legend of Lilith, Adam's rebellious first mate. It premiered at the Festival du Nouveau Cinema in 2013. Elza has received numerous development grants from Telefilm, SODEC and CALQ. To make a living she works on Hollywood sequels. Her production company, Midnight Kingdom Films, can be found at www.midnightkingdom.com. Check out her [Indiegogo](#) campaign for post-production on *Go in the Wilderness*.

Johanna Nutter is a Montreal writer/performer, best known for her multi-award winning international hit solo show, *My Pregnant Brother*. She is also the founder and president of Espace Freestanding Room, a member-driven artist collective on the Main. This is her [Indiegogo campaign for a UK tour of My Pregnant Brother](#).

Adam Vieira is the creative director for [Station 16](#), a creative printshop and gallery. In 2011, Adam began the company's online transition, creating a website and social media accounts. Two years later, Station 16 opened its downtown art gallery, and now prints with international artists and clients. In December 2013, Station 16 created its first crowdfunding project with Kickstarter. They aimed to raise \$20,000 to create an edition of original art prints with artists from around the globe – 16 prints, with 16 artists, from 16 different countries. Just two days shy of their deadline, they reached a goal of \$23,000. Check out his [Kickstarter campaign for A Global Street Art Story](#).

Adam Vieira



- For its crowdfunding campaign, "A Global Street Art Story," Station 16 created a video and held a video launch event at the gallery to encourage a personal connection to the project.
- The most successful campaigns fill a need people have. It's important to interact with people and make them feel a part of the project and its goals.
- Station 16 used social media to show people a behind-the-scenes of their process on a daily basis. They began the drive with a plan of what content they'd use and when they'd post it.
- They gave away small items from Station 16's artists to support the campaign. Those were the most successful items.

- Over the course of the campaign, Station 16 built a global social media network and received funding from many different countries. Their social media friends plugged their campaign and overall, they reached over 10,000 people.
- They achieved their goal with a day left to go. Now they're in the research phase: they'll start releasing prints once they get half the artists they need for the 16-month period.

Johanna Nutter



- Running a campaign alone is much harder than if you're part of an organization or team.
- *My Pregnant Brother* started receiving invitations to festivals, and as it gained success, Nutter decided to go for the "mecca of theatre" – the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August. She got a producer and received a Canada Council grant, but the grant wasn't enough, so she started an Indiegogo campaign.
- She made a video and wrote an earnest letter, and posted about the campaign on Facebook.
- It was pretty slow at first. Towards the end she "babysat the campaign on Facebook," with public thanks to individual donors. This created a snowball effect and she came out with over \$7000.
- She also did everything she could to make herself as visible as possible: being the Fringe festival spokesperson, mounting a fundraising showing of the play, translating the play into French and performing it for a francophone audience, and press from the Montreal Gazette and Le Devoir.
- In the end, much of her windfall consisted of large donations from close friends and family, plus big fans of the show itself.

- Nutter felt a lot of gratitude, but was glad when the campaign was over. She questions whether she would ever use crowdfunding again. Asking people for help was much more difficult than she'd thought.
- Through the journey, Nutter realized that she was more excited about creating relationships with her art and people who are drawn to it. Those relationships need to be built, nourished and actively sustained. If she did crowdfund again, she would keep that goal at the forefront.
- A warning: cumulative rewards are a lot of work.

Elza Kephart



- Kephart had applied for production financing for *Go in the Wilderness*, but didn't receive it. She decided to go ahead anyway, borrowed money, conducted a mini fundraising campaign over email, and went to shoot on the North Shore.
- She had anticipated post-production financing but didn't receive it, so she decided to do a crowdfunding campaign.
- She posted videos every day – including lots of individual videos with crew members. She also created lots of promo material, for example photos of the film shoot to give away among her campaign rewards.
- Prior to the campaign, Kephart did a lot of research, read articles about crowdfunding, and talked to a friend who'd raised money through crowdfunding. She planned every element carefully: how much to ask for, the story of how they shot the film, the length of the campaign (30 days).

- Kephart and four other people posted about the campaign constantly on Facebook. Although they didn't reach their goal, they did receive \$15,000, and people wanted to keep donating afterwards. They got another \$2000 over the next month through PayPal.
- Kephart would not crowdfund again unless she needed to. It's a huge amount of work.
- A friend in social media recommended not starting a campaign until you reach 1000 friends on Facebook – Kephart started adding people to her Facebook page six months in advance.
- Messaging people really helped. Although people were happy to help her out, she didn't like the feeling of harassing people.
- Kephart recommends that you give gifts that people actually want. For example, people loved the photos of the film shoot, but weren't too interested in digital copies of the film.
- Having the trailer helped – they could demonstrate that they had shot a movie and simply needed to finish post-production. This showed that there was a clear reason for the campaign.
- Kephart also stresses the need to take time to build up your community. If she had had more time and someone social-media-savvy dedicated to the campaign, she could've reached outside her circle of friends. That takes a lot of time and energy. It was still mostly friends and family she reached through the campaign.
- Rewards are expensive: you have to spend a lot of time and money (and shipping costs) on preparing and distributing them.
- Kephart would do this again if there was a specific project with a big team behind it – but not by herself.
- Crowdfunding is not a magic bullet. You need to take your time and approach it carefully.

Miranda Campbell



- Canada’s policy structures sometimes don’t provide much support for youth cultural production. It can be hard for young artists to navigate policies that affect their work.
- Work in the creative industries is unstable, and sometimes involves working for free or for low pay. Work and leisure tend to bleed together.
- Many artists want to stay in a small-scale model of production, which can be difficult. There is sometimes a tension between creativity and commerce (“selling out”).
- Crowdfunding allows the creation of small-scale projects that wouldn’t otherwise come into being; but what if those projects go on to make a profit? For example, the virtual reality platform Oculus Rift was initially funded through Kickstarter, then sold to Facebook. The community who supported it in the early stages is now angry, because it perceives that the product of its grassroots support has been sold out to a major corporation.
- There is an idea that state support for art is receding, being replaced by crowdfunding. It’s easy to try to make a living as an artist by using structures like crowdfunding and by finding international audiences online, but creative work isn’t all glamorous. It involves low-to-no pay, sometimes exploitative work, and people often take second or other jobs to subsidize it.
- Crowdfunding is part of a project-based reality for many artists. Policies like maternity leave, health care benefits, and pensions don’t benefit very many artists. Miranda gives the example of the musician Christa Couture, an amputee whose friends started a crowdfunding campaign to purchase an up-to-date leg for her. While this is an inspiring story, we need to consider whether this type of necessity should be covered by policy, rather leaving it up to artists and their friends to take care of themselves.

Question and Answer



- **Moderator: Is crowdfunding a sustainable way to build an artistic career? Is there a particular point in an artistic career where crowdfunding makes the most sense?**

AV: Station 16's preexisting fanbase definitely helped. They would have done the project whether or not they got the funding, but it was a way to introduce themselves to the public and gauge interest.

EK: You definitely have to have people who know and like you and will support you. There isn't necessarily a specific time when you should crowdfund, but it's an advantage if you haven't had a campaign before. Make sure you really need it for a given project, that you really can't get money any other way. People will be less willing to support you a second time.

JN: Crowdfunding can bring people together and start something that has a life of its own that will continue after the campaign. She'd like to keep exploring how crowdfunding can be used in a more communal way.

MC: Successful campaigns often tell a story. It takes time for artists to figure out their own stories. On the other hand, should Christa Couture really have to go back and re-crowdfund when she needs another new leg? Policies like income averaging would create a more sustainable framework for artistic careers that crowdfunding could enter into. In the absence of a sustainable framework, crowdfunding alone isn't going to solve artists' problems.

- **Moderator: Is it harder to ask people for help through crowdfunding, compared to asking them for help in other ways (e.g. face to face, by email)? Do people feel more harassed through crowdfunding?**

AV: It's easier through crowdfunding, because people have the option to give if they want to, and if they don't want to, they won't. That said, it still isn't easy.

EK: She found the constant posting hard. People who were new to crowdfunding were ready to help out, but people in the industry were tired of being asked to contribute to crowdfunding campaigns.

JN: She thinks of it as a reciprocal relationship: she gives to campaigns herself, too. Being on both sides has helped her become more comfortable with relationship of giving and receiving. The receiving side is more difficult.

MC: You have to be aware of tapping out your community. With [Rock Camp for Girls](#) (*where MC is on the board – ed.*), they raised more money through crowdfunding than through a normal donor drive. We need to think about sustainable funding models, rather than favours (ie. that something in the arts is a favour rather than labour).

- **Audience: Indiegogo or Kickstarter?**

AV: Kickstarter is all or nothing: if you don't raise your target amount, you don't receive any of the money you did raise. Kickstarter might have a bigger network because it's available all over the world.

EK: Chose Indiegogo because it was in Canada (Kickstarter wasn't at the time).

JN: Stayed with Kickstarter, out of the idea that if you don't go for it all, you won't get anything.

MC: Rock Camp for Girls chose Indiegogo because they weren't confident they'd reach their goal. Once a goal is reached with Indiegogo, people tend not to give anymore because it looks like you don't need it.

- **Audience: What is to prevent fraudulent people from creating campaigns? Do these platforms have screening processes?**

AV: Kickstarter has a pretty extensive approval process. They made sure Station 16 existed, and then Station 16 submitted an application. Only once it was approved could the campaign begin.

EK: Indiegogo had an approval process. It would be hard to defraud people.

MC: A feeling of being defrauded could be broader than tricking someone out of their money. Take the Oculus Rift example – people feel defrauded when a small-scale project they thought they were supporting becomes large-scale and profit-making. There's an unofficial understanding that crowdfunding is for projects that wouldn't necessarily otherwise be able to exist.

JN: People may also feel defrauded when huge stars ([Xavier Dolan](#), [Zach Braff](#)) use crowdfunding to supplement relatively well-funded projects.

- **Audience: The narrative of grassroots projects that springs up around crowdfunding is a marketing advantage. Even big projects are better off for looking like their creators came up by their bootstraps.**

AV: Crowdfunding is also interesting because the potential audience chooses what it wants to fund, i.e. what it wants to see come into existence.

- **Audience: Crowdfunding is possibly just an alternate platform to sell your product.**

EK: You get a list of all your donors, so you can stay in touch with the people who supported you. Crowdfunding leads to crowdsourcing. This is the second step – keeping those people in the loop.

JN: At the Edinburgh Fringe, the successful shows were those whose teams knew how to sell themselves, not necessarily those with the most artistic merit. We shouldn't rely too heavily on crowdfunding. We need to protect Canada's granting system, because it supports artists in creating, not just spending all their time learning how to market their products.

- **Audience: Crowdfunding can involve an investment in an artist, not just a product. However, at a certain point it's mostly friends and family and established audience who donate. The success of crowdfunding might be deceptively small, though people think otherwise. Is crowdfunding's "success" draining away public support for larger programs like grants?**

EK: Doesn't think so. People who are donating to campaigns are arts supporters anyway, and would be OK with a government that gives artists grants.

AV: Station 16 has only just looked into grants, and the sorts of projects they could do with grants are pretty limited. The Kickstarter campaign was the most logical choice. It's the supporters who decide whether a project should happen.

MC: There are dangers, especially with a government that is not keen to fund nonprofit and arts sectors. Funding is also needed not only to make the product, but also to tour it, distribute it, etc.

JN: The answer probably lies somewhere in the middle, if the two (crowdfunding and grants) could exist together. However, we should be wary that crowdfunding might overtake the granting system we have.

- **Audience: What was the benefit of marketing to 10,000 people of whom only 150 actually donated (as occurred with Station 16's campaign)? Was there a benefit to that broader audience seeing this campaign?**

AV: Telling people that Station 16 existed was a good thing. It was a way for Station 16 to do what they'd usually do, but on a larger scale. People now know the name.

EK: It did allow her to go beyond friends and family. She's getting asked to do crowdfunding workshops and panels like this one. There's no drawback to more people knowing about your work, even if they decide not to give.

AV: Receiving a grant encourages you to apply for more grants. With crowdfunding, it's not the same: he'd wait a while before doing another campaign.

- **Audience: What kinds of changes would you like to see in the crowdfunding process to make it more effective and viable for the campaigner?**

JN: Building community. She'd like to see more of a place for a virtual collaborative model rather than an individualistic one, especially because it's often artists supporting other artists. It can feel like you're operating in a vacuum, and it's good to find people either locally or globally who are doing similar things – to build artistic community, not just earn money.

AV: The platform was good, but it will always be difficult for the arts. His biggest challenge was getting media interest. There should be more ways to get a campaign "out there."

MC: Referring to a recent New Yorker article on crowdfunding ([“Can Crowdfunding Replace Artists’ Day Jobs?”](#) by Elizabeth Weiss): Crowdfunding can’t replace between-project income. People need to rethink the limitations of crowdfunding – for example, there isn’t much support for the idea of crowdfunding a salary.

